

TIME FOR STEAM ON THE ALASKA RAILROAD

Thursday, October 17th, started like any other morning in the call center at the Alaska Railroad – until, at 9:00 a.m., the 2019 Holiday Trains went on sale. Within 15 minutes, online volume was so strong, the booking engine for AlaskaRailroad.com could not keep up with demand and crashed. Customers flooded the reservations line, overwhelming our call center until all six departures of the Holiday Trains were sold out – over 2,600 seats in less than two hours.

To say that seasonal special event trains are a hit with Alaskans is an understatement. At the close of our busy summer passenger season, we are pleased to offer a variety of annual special departures: Anchorage’s Great Alaska Beer Train, Fairbanks’ Hoo Doo Choo Choo, and a number of special trains designed especially for families and children.

How fantastic the experience would be if the locomotive were an authentic 557 Steam Engine restored to its original glory. The last operating steam engine on the Alaska Railroad system.

In 2011, the Alaska Railroad Corporation presented a business plan for future operation of Engine 557, proposing that the locomotive would be used in special departures such as a dinner train service making the scenic round-trip journey from Anchorage to Portage. To ensure financial sustainability in regards to the operations and ongoing maintenance of Engine 557, a special Heritage Preservation fee would be added to regular ticket charges on any movement that used the steam locomotive.

The Rasmuson Foundation generously provided a \$350,000 matching grant based on that original business plan. Engine 557 Restoration Company was organized as a 501(c)(3) non-profit (EIN 46-2663256) to raise funds and perform the restoration work using volunteers and paid consultants.

Alaska Railroad Corporation has been in full support of this restoration project, providing 5,000 square foot of shop space and utilities. Engine 557 also has access to Alaska Railroad surplus items. Margin above cost on all 557-themed products sold in Alaska Railroad gift shops accrue to 557 Restoration Company.

In recent years, events such as traffic density, equipment availability and the advent of federally required Positive Train Control have all overtaken the original business plan. However, it remains the intention of the Alaska Railroad Corporation to utilize Engine 557 in special service. We are hopeful that the issues of Positive Train Control as applied to steam engines by the Federal Rail Administration will be resolved as the implementation of Positive Train Control is a continuing process.

In light of the new realities, an updated business plan to accommodate special event service using the “557 Engine Special Steam Excursion” service is underway. As examples, the

current schedule of Special Event Trains is attached along with published rates. Any of these trains could be packaged as a "Special Steam Excursion" with Engine 557 providing "pull" on one end. The 557 Historic Preservation Fee would be added to these fares.

Bringing steam engine service to the Alaska Railroad again!

Dale Wade

Vice President, Marketing and Customer Service