

Loyal rail riders attend Elizabethtown station groundbreaking

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Elizabethtown

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Twice in his life, Franklin Shearer has fallen in love.

First, he fell for trains.

Then he fell for his wife, Lucille.

The retired Hersheypark executive combines both passions by riding the rails with her, always using Amtrak's Elizabethtown station.

Shearer feels so strongly about Amtrak and its Elizabethtown station that he drove from his Palmyra home to attend Monday's groundbreaking for the station's \$9.4 million upgrade.

The ceremony was led by U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter and U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, who were joined by two dozen public and private officials.

After Specter and LaHood made opening remarks and fielded a question from a reporter, Shearer raised his hand. Specter called on him.

Shearer said: "My wife and I travel 20,000 miles a year on Amtrak. All of our travel begins and ends right here. We compliment you for this project. Thank you for making it happen."

A pleasantly surprised Specter quipped in response: "We're going to put you down to be the next anchorman on CBS."

Afterward, Shearer said he made the 25-minute trip to Elizabethtown solely to express gratitude to the federal officials, because he believes rail travel is vital.

"I just decided, if the opportunity comes about, I'll say something. All it took was one person asking a question," he said.

Shearer and his wife, both 62, use Amtrak for long-distance vacation trips, including trips to Maine, Canada, Florida and California, and for regional jaunts to nearby cities like Philadelphia.



Ground was broken Monday for renovations to the Elizabethtown train station. (Richard Hertzler/Staff)

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"It's fast. Convenient. Reasonably priced. Frequent service. And you can see the country," said Shearer, who's planning a September journey to Flagstaff, Ariz., en route to the Grand Canyon.

Shearer, retired from Hershey Entertainment & Resort Co., where he worked as senior vice president and Hersheypark Group general manager, wasn't the only person in E-town enthused about the project, funded by two federal economic-stimulus grants.

Specter, whose 2010 re-election bid faces a primary challenge from U.S. Rep. Joe Sestak, called the project "an illustration of the effectiveness of the stimulus package."

The Pennsylvania Democrat called Elizabethtown "an important stop" on the Amtrak line, yet one saddled with "a facility which is antiquated — no restroom facilities, no ticketing, no place for passengers to sit."

LaHood praised the project as an example of stimulus dollars "being spent correctly, by the book." He also lauded Specter twice for "his very courageous vote" for the stimulus bill.

The long-awaited project, expected to be completed in January 2011, consists of several facets.

It will overhaul the station building, a small stone structure opened in 1917 but closed in 1979.

Beyond the building's revitalization, the project will pave the station's 65-space parking lot, acquire another 100 spaces off-site and add a bus shelter.

Other changes include installing elevators to reach the tracks above the station building and parking lot, and raising and lengthening the train platforms.

Besides giving the stop's 90,000 yearly riders nicer facilities and making room for future growth, the project will have other benefits, borough manager Peter Whipple said.

The project will serve as a catalyst for more economic development projects on the borough's west side and help lessen traffic congestion in the area, Whipple said.

source: LancasterOnline.com