

8 Sep 09
Upper Rio Grande Economic Development Council
Regular Meeting Minutes
The Hungry Logger, South Fork, CO

The meeting was called to order by President T.J. Brown.

There were no changes to the agenda.

The previous month's meeting minutes were approved on a motion by Jim Clare, and a second by Barbara Musick.

The Treasurer's report was approved on a motion by Robert Hagedorn and a second by Mike Hurst.

The program was presented by Ed Ellis of the Rio Grande Scenic Railway. The outer perimeters of the railroad are Walsenburg, Antonito, and South Fork. His presentation was about the TIGER grant that the railroad was about to submit to Ray LaHood at the US Dept of Transportation. Rural Mobility is a key requirement of this grant.

One of their priorities is a freight terminal at Antonito where minerals and other materials coming out of northern New Mexico can be staged and loaded onto the rail system. This land is owned by the State of Colorado. The extreme weight of these kinds of products traveling by truck causes the maximum wear to our road system as opposed to the rails which are built to withstand these loads. He also referenced a smaller terminal at Hannah where they already own land on the west side of the valley. These two terminals could employ up to 100 people.

A large part of the grant request is for the upgrade of the old existing track to welded steel that can accommodate larger locomotives which will be able to cross the La Veta pass at acceptable speeds. The last investment in track work on La Veta was in 1950. Since Ed bought the railroad he has invested \$5,000,000 in replacing and moving the old track from the pass down to the valley floor where the stress loads are not as great. Their goal is to achieve a 60MPH rating.

Ed explained that in spite of all his years in the railroad business, his recent purchase of two commuter lines in England is teaching him a lot about the social service of moving people. When fuel prices go up individuals don't move as freely and this kind of service becomes more desirable. If they receive this grant they will be running up to 4 trains a day in the valley. They are offering in the grant to run passenger service for the next 20 years without federal subsidies. An affordable ticket price will help the economically disadvantaged and the youth who are without a means of transportation from town to town in our region. They expect to see 25 – 30 riders per day at the start, with 100 per train being the breakeven point which will take some time to achieve.

The Rocky Mountain Rail Authority is currently looking at hi speed rail from Cheyenne to Albuquerque. If this is accomplished there will be a need for freight alternatives.

Here in the valley they are looking at a train to the Sand Dunes National Park in the spirit of how many of our National Parks began. They would also entertain the possibility of rail to the Wolf Creek Ski Area which would eliminate a lot of the highway traffic and provide a safe means of access on snow days. He is open to where a depot in South Fork might be located

whether by US 160 or in the Wharton Town Center. In response to a question about Salida, he said it is possible but that is a long way off.

The railroad currently handles all the valley wheat, 2/3s of the valley barley and about 5 – 10% of the potatoes. They lack the modern cars that are temperature controlled by computer and satellite in order to protect the potatoes while in transit. Moving hay by rail is a good option but faces stiff opposition from truckers in the valley who have been earning a living with hay for a long time. He pointed out that with the recent fuel price volatility and other economic factors many of the 600 regional rail lines in America are re-sprouting.

A motion by Don Van Wormer with a second by Bonnie Asplin was unanimously supported to write a letter of support for the railroads grant request.

Reports;

- Monte Vista had a meeting with a real estate developer scheduled regarding the Monte Villa Inn. A good review of the September 12th Potato Festival with all its events was given. CDOT and DOLA are ready to move on the 1st Avenue project.
- Del Norte received a DOLA grant which will allow them to go forward with the purchase of the Del Norte Potato Growers warehouses for the purpose of a new Town Hall, Business Park, and Business Incubator.
- South Fork reported the Rhythms on the Rio event went well. Volunteers were excited; about 1600 attended, and the event may have broken even in spite of this being the first year. They intend to get next year's sponsors on board by 1 Jan 2010 for budgeting purposes and to offer on line tickets next year.
- Rio Grande County reminded everyone of the "Coffee with the Commissioners" event on Wednesday from 4pm to 8-pm to discuss ideas for how to deal with the declining revenues that lie ahead. They are also looking to fill two vacancies on the Lodging Tax Board (1 from Monte Vista and 1 from Del Norte).

Donna Wehe pointed out a 9 Nov event where Don Marostica, the head of the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade, will be in the valley all day.

The formation of a nominating committee for Board of Directors candidates was brought up and after deafening silence it was decided the sitting Board of Directors will be the committee.

The next meeting is in Del Norte at Boogie's on the 13th of October. The program will be Dusty Hicks updating The Village at Wolf Creek's alternative plan.

Submitted,
Marty Asplin

P.S. Congratulations to Tri-State Energy for winning ColoradoBiz Magazine's Energy and Natural Resources category as a top performing company.