In the smallest towns and biggest cities, they stood sentinel over the decades, quietly aging, the days of bustling passengers and thriving train activity a distant memory. Historic and significant, both architecturally and culturally, rail and bus stations offer a direct lineage to our nation’s past — one well worth preserving and one that offers a bridge to the future. In many cases, they are the Great Stations of our future, too.

As focal points for transportation and economic activity, railroad stations were civic treasures as much as they were transportation facilities. Railroads often spared no expense to create imposing edifices that helped shape and anchor many communities. To establish and maintain their presence across the country, railroads built nearly 80,000 stations in virtually every city, town and village in America. These stations represented a community’s gateway to the outside world, for both transportation and communications. The rail station was a portal for passengers, as well as the U.S. Mail, Railway Express, and telegraph service.

By the mid-20th century, as alternative transportation modes siphoned passengers and freight from trains, railroads reduced and eliminated service, and neglected or even abandoned their stations. Today an estimated 20,000 stations remain; of these, only about 1,500 are in active use as rail stations — for Amtrak and regional commuter rail lines. Others have survived in innovative reincarnations as restaurants, offices, shops or even homes.

Today, there are hundreds of abandoned and neglected railroad stations across the country. Restoration of these stations can be a catalyst for economic development and investment. The stations are still valuable assets that can promote and support multimodal transportation services as well as mixed use tourism, commerce, housing, entertainment and other forms of business development.

Raton’s

Local citizens: “Please don’t let it waste away.”

By Charles Rutkowski
Raton Is Rail

Raton is a community of 7,400 persons in northeastern New Mexico, midway between Denver and Albuquerque. Raton owes its existence to nearby Raton Pass, which provides a path through the Front Range of the Rockies at an elevation of 7,834 feet. The Santa Fe Trail, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway and more recently, Interstate 25 slip through the Raton Pass on their routes between Colorado and New Mexico.

For the Santa Fe Railway, traversing the Pass required special locomotives to help pull cars. These locomotives called Raton home, where they were fueled, serviced and repaired. Over the years, the railroad developed extensive facilities in the city to support the 60 trains a day that passed through Raton at the turn of the century. The centerpiece of the Santa Fe’s facilities, and downtown Raton, was and is a Spanish Mission Revival style passenger station, constructed in 1903. The railroad’s dominant economic role in Raton is evidenced by the fact that many of the city’s Victorian-style storefronts, which still survive, faced the railroad and the station rather than the main street through town. The Raton station and five surrounding blocks are now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, as the Raton Historic District.

Like the stations in many small communities, the Raton depot was neglected as rail passenger service declined. The station might have fallen into complete disrepair were it not for Raton’s location on the Santa
Fe’s main line between Chicago and Los Angeles, which ensured that passenger service survived into the Amtrak era. Today, Raton is served by two Amtrak trains daily, as well as four Amtrak Thruway buses that provide connections to Denver. The splendid station has been converted to freight use, serving the Burlington Northern Santa Fe’s freight operations. Passengers have been relegated to a temporary prefab building next to the depot.

Yet nearly 100 years after it was first built, the Raton Station is on the verge of a renewal. The community recognized not only the historic significance of the building, but its potential role as a modern multimodal transportation center. Many of the 19th and early 20th century buildings surrounding the depot have already been restored, including the former Wells Fargo Express building, immediately adjacent to the station. Built in a similar Mission-style architecture, the Express building is now the Old Pass Gallery, an art museum and multipurpose community center.

Rehabilitation of the depot would represent a further continuation of the city’s historic preservation effort, and would anchor the east end of the Raton Historic District. The restoration would not merely be cosmetic, but functional as well. Raton retains an intercity passenger rail volume of more than 10,000 passengers annually, far out of proportion to its size. The nearest scheduled air service is in Santa Fe, nearly three hours away. The city also is the nearest passenger rail station to the Philmont Boy Scout Ranch, and each summer thousands of scouts travel to the Ranch via Amtrak. At the station, the scouts transfer between trains and buses for the last leg of their trip. Finally, Raton is a transfer point for passengers traveling between Los Angeles and Denver. Although Denver has direct rail service to the Bay Area of California, travel times

Los Angeles’s Gateway Terminal
One of the nation’s most grand and intermodal transit stations is the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s astounding Gateway Bus Terminal, which was completed in 1995. Adjacent to the singular Los Angeles Union Passenger Terminal train station (pictured to the right), the Gateway Terminal features an impressive glass domed entry building, an enormous mural (featuring the many faces of Los Angeles’ history) manicured gardens and a shark-filled aquarium. Most importantly, it features heavy bus traffic — more than 1,500 a day serve the station.

And for nearly 50,000 Los Angelenos daily, the terminal is a quick connection to the city’s subway and commuter rail lines via an underground walkway connecting the modern Gateway Bus Terminal with the historic Union Passenger Terminal. The connection is by design. Gateway Terminal designers looked to the famed train station for inspiration.

According to the Los Angeles Times, the designers rightly viewed the Union Passenger Terminal as, “a triumph that expressed respect for the American public. They wanted the same to be true of the Gateway.”
to southern California are faster via a Denver-Raton Amtrak bus connection and the Southwest Chief train from Raton. Intercity buses operated by Texas, New Mexico and Oklahoma Bus Lines now stop at a local McDonald's restaurant. Relocation of the intercity bus stop to the rail depot will allow intermodal connections with Amtrak's services. Raton does not currently have a local public transit program, but as with other communities, the refurbished station could become a transit hub.

Renewing Raton Station

Restoration and rehabilitation of the Raton rail station emerged from a progressive partnership between the city of Raton and the Downtown Raton business community. Both recognized the potential of the station project, particularly in light of the successful restoration of some other historic structures surrounding the station. However, neither possessed the resources to move the project, which was becoming increasingly complex, from the conceptual phase to implementation and reality.

In 1998, the Lodging and Tourism Association of Raton requested help from the Community Transportation Association of America. The Association responded through its Rural Passenger Transportation Technical Assistance Program, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and provides economic development and focused planning support for rural transit programs and facilities.

Association staff, along with input from the consulting firm Leigh, Scott & Cleary and the Colorado Architecture Partnership, initially worked with members of the community to identify what they would like the rail station to become. The most common response from citizens was, “Please, fix it up, and don’t let it waste away.”

There was consensus that the depot should continue to serve as a transportation center. Because the building is large enough to accommodate other functions and services, local residents offered suggestions for complementary development themes. These themes fell into three broad categories: an interpretive center focused upon the nearby Santa Fe Trail, a restaurant theme and a Raton museum theme.

Those working on the project formed a team that evaluated each of the themes for compatibility with local and regional economic development goals, compatibility with existing downtown land use and com-
patibility with both the historic heritage of the station and its contemporary transportation functions. The team recommended that the community pursue the restaurant theme, and to develop the entire facility as an intermodal station, incorporating Amtrak ticket and baggage services, intercity bus services, a food court with either a sit-down restaurant or fast food options and local and regional tourist information. The restaurant theme would provide sufficient space for transportation-related services, and would include leasable space to generate revenue to operate the facility. The transportation and food service uses would complement one another; rail and bus passengers would represent patrons for the restaurant, allowing the enhanced amenities to attract additional intercity rail and bus passengers, as well as other tourists.

**History Saved**

The Raton station, like many rail depots around the nation, is a historically significant structure. Because it is included on the National Register of Historic Places, any alterations to the structure must maintain its original character and appearance. Unfortunately, in the 97 years since it was built, the building's exterior and interior have been modified extensively. To bring the station back to its original appearance is a costly endeavor. For example, the station originally had two signature tile and copper towers which were removed during the 1920s. In the ensuing years, multiple suspended ceilings have been added to the interior, obscuring but also preserving the original wood ceiling. When the station was built, the grounds surrounding it were landscaped into an attractive urban park with lawns, trees and an elaborate irrigation system. Decades of neglect have transformed the grounds into weedy gravel lots. The project consultants were able to retrieve both the original architectural drawings for the station from the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad archives, with many contemporary photographs portraying the station around the time it was built. These resources will be invaluable for future work on the station.

As owner of the station building and surrounding land, the Burlington Northern Santa Fe is clearly a key partner and stakeholder in the Raton depot project. The railroad currently uses the entire structure for its local and regional signal and communications department. Early in the planning process, the railway indicated a willingness to vacate the station and transfer ownership of the facility to the city, but only if a replacement building was provided. As a result, the scope of the project grew to encompass construction of a new sig-
nal and communication center, adding as much as $950,000 to the total cost of the project. Because the city of Raton wanted to retain the railroad jobs that were based in the station, the new building had to be located in Raton. Fortuitously, BNSF discovered that several of its tracks across from the depot were actually on city property. The city and the railroad have since opened negotiations for a property trade in which Raton would secure ownership of the depot while the railroad would receive the property beneath its tracks, as well as a new structure in Raton for its signal and communication department. What results is a prototypical win-win for the community and the historic property.

As the scope of the station restoration project grew, the consultant team focused on answering two critical questions: How much the project would cost; and how it would be funded. The Colorado Architecture Partnership developed a conceptual cost estimate of $913,500 for restoration of the depot and landscaping of the surrounding property. With construction of a replacement building for the railroad, the total cost of the project was approximately $1.9 million.

Recognizing that funding would most likely come from a variety of sources, the project participants pursued development of a diversified financing and investment package. Early in 1999, Raton officials asked members of the New Mexico congressional delegation to earmark funds from the U.S. Department of Transportation's Transportation and Community and Systems Preservation Pilot Program (TCSP). This innovative program supports development of projects that address interrelated problems involving transportation, land development, environmental protection, public safety and economic development. Raton was successful in its efforts and Congress set aside $522,000 in FY 2000. Raton requested an additional TCSP earmark from the FY 2001 federal budget. Once again, Raton was successful, and secured another $704,000. The New Mexico Department of Transportation demonstrated the benefits of the program.

Raton, continued on page 43
COMMUNITY TRANSPORTATION

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A Blueprint for Preservation Success

During its planning phase, a number of citizens suggested that a World War II memorial be incorporated into the Raton station. Some also suggested that the restoration include the historically significant Railroad Reading Room building, which is adjacent to the station. The Reading Room was built by the railroad in 1922 to provide library facilities for employees as an alternative to the saloon. Inclusion of either of these two elements would escalate the cost of the project, but might also attract additional funding.

The Raton Station began as a single-purpose concept, but is emerging as the city’s principal community development project. One of the keys to the success of the project has been the depth of participation throughout the community. Active involvement of the public and private sectors have focused energy and momentum on the project, and raised its profile in a small community. Raton’s continuing success is a blueprint for innumerable similarly sized communities with historic rail stations. Some of these architectural landmarks were centers of commercial and transportation activity in the distant past, and after decades of neglect, they are poised to regain this role.

Railroad stations were once the epicenters of their cities and towns. They stood for years as many a community’s gateway to the outside world. But after decades of neglect, many rail stations grew forlorn and lonely. With strong local support to restore the rail station that offer a direct link to this country’s past, they may soon regain this more prominent civic role — Great Stations re-born. ☸