

## CHARGING ADMISSION

-Eugene Vicknair, Director

Since it's opening, the museum has always been a free admission facility, with the exception of certain special events. Off and on over the years, the concept of charging for entrance has been reviewed, debated and ultimately shelved.

Several years ago, we took a major step by charging admission for our Santa Trains, which previously had been viewed as a free event for the local community. The fiscal reality of operating a facility such as ours in the winter for this event without income was discovered to be unsustainable and so we instituted what was basically a parking fee of \$5 for non-members. This proved to be very successful, with attendance unaffected and Santa Trains finally covering their expenses when coupled with donations from the community.

This experience along with other factors has once again led to a review on the pros and cons of admission. The review is going to be an extensive one, including research into practices of other museums, projected impacts on revenue, the perception of a free facility vs. charging and the use of an admission fee to encourage membership. Aiding us in this examination is a team from the Harvard Community Partners, a group that provides guidance to non-profits. As part of a review of museum operations they are exploring the admission idea in parallel with our own Business Practices Committee.

The FRRS Board of Directors has already reviewed some preliminary findings including:

- Few museums operate today without charging admission, which forms a major part of their revenue. There are a few railroad museums / historic societies that are free, but a majority of those feature an excursion ride as their primary public focus and charge for rides. Our review has also included aircraft, automobile, art and historic museums, in addition to rail museums.
- Museums that charge admission typically offer a membership option wherein members receive discount or free admission and other benefits. Memberships are priced to encourage repeat visitors to join rather than pay for multiple visits.
- Most visitors expect to pay admission to a museum and tend to value the facility more

highly when they do.

- Most museums that have switched to an admission model (including some that were free when the WPRM first opened) have found very little if any drop off in visitor levels and have enjoyed a substantial boost in revenue.

In view of these and other findings, the FRRS Board will soon make a decision on the question of admission. Much work has been done in the last several years to lay a foundation for a more professional, more developed museum with improved buildings, educational displays, paid staff and a better overall experience. Charging to enter the museum not only speaks to this higher level of operation but would also play a major part in funding it.

While we realize that this could be controversial to some members, we want to provide assurance that certain things will be adhered to if an admission system is implemented:

- 1 – FRRS members will always be admitted free of charge. Our members are one of our prized assets and the WPRM will always be for them. As such, any proposed plan will include recognition and free admission for members.
- 2 – Care will be taken to ensure that any admission plan benefits and improves the Society and our efforts.
- 3 – If a change is done to an admission system, it will be decided and announced with a lead-time to the opening of the season, rather than being a short notice action.
- 4 – Systems will be put in place to ensure quick proof of payment. Our volunteers will not need to become "ticket cops".

This is not a step that is being explored lightly, however it is one whose time may have come. We are guardians of a large and prestigious collection, one whose scope was not even imagined 25 years ago. From our roster of historic rail equipment, which numbers over 160 pieces, to our rapidly growing archives of documents and photographs, we hold one of the finest and most comprehensive collections in the nation, possibly in the world, devoted to one railroad family. The care and improvement of such a collection is not a cheap endeavor and one we must take great pains to properly nurture and share with the public.