

## Train-crazy Q-C puts RiverWay on right track

By Quad-City Times | Tuesday, September 19, 2006

If RiverWay 2006 proved anything, it's this: Quad-Citians are crazy about trains. Trains were the highlight of 2004's Grand Excursion and trains stole the show for last weekend's RiverWay celebration.



More than 2,000 purchased tickets for the day trips to Iowa City, Muscatine and Geneseo. At least four times

that number lined the tracks along the way, taking photos and video and waving to the passersby. Untold thousands smiled when the train whistles blew up and down our river valley sounding echoes from bygone eras.

(Rebecca Paulsen/Muscatine Journal) Crowds gathered along Muscatine's riverfront to welcome the steam locomotive as it dropped off passengers Sunday.

Perhaps we may be onto something.

Sally Heffernan, the city of Rock Island's special projects coordinator, helped organize the RiverWay train excursions with the Quad-City Convention and Visitors Bureau. Already, Heffernan envisions a few changes that could turn Quad-City train mania into an annual, or biennial celebration that taps into our apparent love of the rail.

Initial suggestions include:

- More — but shorter — trips to accommodate families drawn to the steam engines who make a spur-of-the-moment decision to get on board.
- Improving passenger access so they don't have to walk quite as far to board.
- Coordinating train-related conferences, swap meets, reunions and other events to engage rail fans who flock trackside to catch glimpses of the steam engines and restored cars.

This initial RiverWay celebration was hit and miss. The Ghost Bridge presentation never quite clicked until the final show Saturday evening. The showings were derailed by technical problems, or wind that blew the fountain-spray screen of water onto spectators. River Action promises to make the bridge video available to those intrigued by Quad-City historian Ronald Tweet's deep research and compelling narration.

The storytelling events spread all over the Quad-Cities were promising, but a bit unwieldy for people trying to navigate the schedule. Anchoring such events in one festival area near the trains might improve attendance.

Most promising of all: A first-ever ticketing operation by our own Quad-City Convention and Visitors Bureau. Ticketing local events always is a pain for event planners, who typically can't afford the fees or bureaucracy associated with the big-name, for-profit ticketing services. We're hearing raves about QCCVB's ticketing service, which could prove to be a model to boost attendance and marketing for lots of other local events.

Back to those steam engines that were the heart of the RiverWay event. Coordinating the passenger excursions on our busy freight tracks took some doing. Thanks to River Action, the Quad-City Convention and Visitors Bureau and the Friends of 261 for tapping into our community's rail fervor. Thanks to the Iowa Interstate and Iowa Chicago Eastern railroads for finding room in their busy freight schedules to accommodate our community's rail interest.

We can't wait to hear those steam train whistles again.

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