

# Grant County coalition discusses rail

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By Matthew Weaver

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OLYMPIA -Representatives from around the Columbia Basin recently returned from Olympia, where they told members of the state Legislature stories.

Columbia Basin Railroad President Brig Temple said he wanted to convey the fact he considers the Moses Lake area and the Grant County International Airport as one of the finest pieces of industrial land in the country.

"It really is a good story," he said. "That's what we were telling them, the story of Moses Lake and why they have supported funding and why businesses are looking to locate there."

Temple pointed to the area's high ranking in Boeing's consideration for its 7E7 assembly in 2003, amongst other examples of projects for which the area was considered.

"Those are the big, heavy, industrial projects no other place in the state really can compete for," Temple said. "Grant County International Airport is a unique piece of property. Every new customer I'm seeing coming in, all of these customers we're seeing coming into the Moses Lake area, are looking for rail. This is an opportunity to bring rail to the second largest airport in the country."

The coalition included representatives of the Port of Moses Lake, Grant County Economic Development Council, Grant County, Columbia Basin Railroad, the Moses Lake School District and the Aero-Space Port International Group, or ASPI.

"It's important to get the Legislature informed on what happens in Eastern Washington and the importance of the rail connections to Grant County International Airport," Temple said. "I think it went well. It's never a simple process where you go in the first meeting and they throw money toward your project. It's an education process. It often takes a couple years, a couple of trips, to build the kind of support you need for the kind of funding we're looking for."

The coalition discussed a funding request for \$2.5 million to the state Legislature to construct a new rail segment from the south side of the Port of Moses Lake property at Grant County International Airport to the industrial area on the east and north sides of the airport.

Temple said a critical point is the fact Moses Lake Industries said they will leave unless rail service is put into their area, located at Randolph Road.

"We have the rail that runs through the middle of town," Temple said. "None of us view that as a long-term, viable rail corridor. However, it is what it is. It's what we have. It's in the ground now and it can be maintained for some period of time until Segment 1 is built. It's nothing more than a Band-Aid, but it allows Moses Lake Industries to get rail service as soon as we fund the segment 2."

Support of Moses Lake Industries is more important than following the Northern Columbia Basin Railroad Project segment order, Temple said.

"We're deferring our own interest here," he said. "Also, there's a steel company out there that wants rail service. There's some other companies in that area (too). ASPI has long wanted rail service to their property. It creates an opportunity. We're trying to make sure we don't lose Moses Lake Industries."

Development on the Wheeler Road corridor, which comprises segment 1 of the project, is something the railroad will be pressing to do very quickly, probably even simultaneously as it works to get rail, Temple said. It can be worked on from a different angle and because of the rail already running through the town, there's a little bit of time.

"Not much, but a little bit of time," Temple said, noting the need to get rail for Moses Lake Industries is immediate.

The coalition also briefed legislators on a funding request for \$250,000 for a rail pedestrian underpass that would provide direct access for students and other pedestrians from the Blacks Addition area of Moses Lake to get to Longview Elementary School. Temple was encouraged by the response from the legislators.

"The state of Washington along with the state of Pennsylvania, those are probably the two most proactive states in terms of funding for short-line railroading" he said. "The state of Washington has made a commitment to short-line railroads. The Burlington Northern and Union Pacific railroads, while they're fantastic at moving stuff across country, it's the short lines that create the opportunities for local businesses to grow."

The Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway recognizes that fact, Temple added, and also supports short-line programs. "We're supposed to be the local franchisee, if you will," he said.

**Full-time lobbyist Pat Boss will continue to press the issues with legislators and build as much support as possible for the coalition, Temple noted.**

"You work this one legislator at a time and hope there's some money available," Temple said. "The answer is always no until you ask. Do I think we're going to get funding this year? I don't know. We brought this up to (the Washington State Department of Transportation) and we brought it to the Legislature and we'll continue to work it. It's a short session, there's not as many dollars in the short session as there will be in the odd years, the 2007-2009 time frame. But it's very encouraging. I think Moses Lake acquitted themselves very well."