

Ohio's iron triangle welcomes fans

Preservation group and city partner to build a railroad park in Fostoria, Ohio



A westbound CSX freight on the former B&O passes a local working the C&O Yard in Fostoria, Ohio, in May 2010. James B. Winters

Fostoria is sending a message to railfans: We want you! While plans for a railroad park take shape, this Ohio city 40 miles south of Toledo is rolling out the welcome mat for rail enthusiasts.

You'll notice this friendly atmosphere in unlikely places, such as the city's Best Western hotel. A sign on the front desk says, "Tell us if you're a railfan." I did, prompting the clerk to give my friend and I each a railfan welcome packet containing directories of area restaurants, attractions, and amenities, as well as historic railroad information, put together by the Fostoria Rail Preservation Society.

The most surprising item? A foldout map detailing Fostoria's railroads and streets, with a track diagram, radio frequencies, historical information about Fostoria's rail lines and structures — plus the locations of safe parking areas by the tracks where railfans can stay and photograph, as well as areas that are strictly off limits. The map even lists the names of nearby signals and interlockings so folks monitoring the radio can figure out which direction the trains are coming from — a plus, given the city's heavy rail volume.

Two CSX main lines and a Norfolk Southern line cross at Fostoria on three sets of diamonds, forming an iron triangle that routinely sees more than 100 trains a day. A CSX tower operator controls all movements through town, like a traffic cop at a six-way intersection. A visit in May on a

Tuesday yielded 52 trains in 12 hours. That's more trains than you'll see in Marion (42 miles south of Fostoria on CSX's ex-Chesapeake & Ohio line, thick with coal and auto traffic) or in Deshler (26 miles west on the former Baltimore & Ohio main line, now CSX's marquee East Coast-Chicago route). The third line, NS's Fostoria District from Bellevue, Ohio, to Fort

Wayne, Ind., is the lightest of the three, but noteworthy for auto rack and RoadRailer trains. Inside that triangle of diamonds, a railfan park is taking shape that will be the perfect spot to catch all of the action.

Right now, the land is little more than a dirt parking area with a picnic table, trash can, and a Porta-John. But the Fostoria Rail Preservation Society is working



with the city and area railfans to create a place to meet the needs of railroad photographers and their families. The society developed and tabulated railfan surveys to provide demographic information that helped the city secure an \$815,000 grant from the Ohio Department of Transportation to build the railfan park (the city will provide a 20 percent match).

A local business donated the former Toledo & Ohio Central depot to the preservation society (the group is raising funds and soliciting help from the Ohio Army National Guard to move the structure to the park). On its own, the society secured a \$30,000 grant to purchase the former Lake Erie & Western depot, now an office of the Fostoria Area Visitors Bureau. The society also established an audio stream of the tower and a link to an ATCS feed for the area at www.GreatLakesLive.com.

The city bought the 5-acre plot for the park in 2006 and last year arranged for the demolition of a building on the site, using funds from a city hotel tax. The grant money is expected to be released in the state's 2010-2011 budget, and the park could be completed as early as December 2012, says society member Ellen Gatrell.

The city's annual railroad festival takes place Sept. 25 this year, and features a train show, railroad photography contest, historic rail tours, a farmers' market, and airplane rides over the iron triangle. Plan your visit at www.FostoriaIronTriangle.com.

Trains 11/10