

Florida railfan platform opens

Plant City debuts train-watching platform at CSX diamond



A CSX freight passes the new Plant City train-watching platform. The facility provides a safe, comfortable, and legal place to watch trains in west central Florida. Scott A. Hartley

Add Plant City, Fla., to the list of communities that provide a safe and legal location for people to watch trains. Named for railroad entrepreneur Henry B. Plant, this city located between Orlando and Tampa offers rail enthusiasts a busy crossing of two CSX main lines and a branch from the nearby “Bone Valley” phosphate mining region (see “Big Business in Bone Valley,” June 2005).

The Plant City Railfest marked the opening of the Robert W. Willaford Railroad Museum at the city-owned Union Depot, which once served Atlantic Coast Line and Seaboard Air Line. Across the tracks from the brick depot is a two-story train-watching platform, handicapped-accessible and equipped with a radio scanner.

The facility’s name acknowledges the many contributions of a local retired CSX engineer who donated much of his extensive collection to the project. Marking the heritage of the site are two of Willaford’s most significant gifts: a late-model Seaboard extended-cupola caboose and a small Whitcomb diesel switcher painted as ACL

No. 508. (The real No. 508 was an EMC E6 passenger locomotive built in 1940.)

Plant City Commissioner Michael Sparkman worked on the project since its earliest proposal and proudly points out that virtually all of its costs were covered with private donations. CSX provided a \$25,000 grant, and local contributions brought the total to more than \$200,000. In addition, several area businesses made substantial in-kind donations in the construction of the viewing platform and the moving and placement of Willaford’s substantial collection.

Visitors to the museum will find an interesting assortment of local railroad artifacts in and around the station. They also can expect to see a variety of CSX freight trains, including the Tropicana orange juice train, which passes northbound on the ex-Seaboard S-Line during midday, five days a week. Amtrak’s *Silver Star* makes four passes daily as the northbound and southbound trains make their trips in and out of Tampa on the former ACL A-Line.