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Western students report on Blaine train stop

Features, News December 16, 2015



By Steve Guntli

Three Western Washington University (WWU) students spoke to a crowd of curious residents about the feasibility of a passenger train stop in Blaine.

Michelle Anderson-Irons, Joe Glithero and Lora Sonnen, three students in WWU's international business program, presented their evaluation in Blaine City Council chambers on December 3. The students, under the guidance of professor Tom Roehl, conducted a market analysis, compiled target demographics for ridership, proposed some marketing strategies and developed a list of pros and cons for the station stop.

The students emphasized that the report was not an official feasibility study, but was a valid representation of the questions an actual feasibility study would examine. The students will repeat the presentation before the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) later this month.

A passenger stop in Blaine would mostly serve Canadians in the lower mainland of B.C., which has a population of around 1.1 million people. Glithero said he rode the train from Portland to Vancouver and spoke with commuters along the way, polling Canadians about the possibility of a closer train stop.

"The general attitude was positive, especially among people in the Fraser Valley," he said.

Blaine would offer riders living south of the Fraser River flexibility and a shorter commute than the Vancouver station, which is often subject to heavy traffic. Riding the train is more eco-friendly, which is a major concern of the growing number of millennials entering the workforce. A train stop in Blaine could be a boon for the local economy, as riders waiting for the train can shop in nearby stores or eat in local restaurants.

The students concluded that a train stop in Blaine could be beneficial to the local economy, but it would come with a few drawbacks. Firstly, the uncertain border times could impact ridership among people without a NEXUS pass. Only two passenger trains would pass through per day, and Sonnen said she was still working with Amtrak and WSDOT to determine what minimum ridership levels would have to be to make the stop worthwhile.

Sonnen said she compared Blaine with a similar city in New York to get an idea of how the train stop would work, and the results weren't particularly encouraging. The town of Rouses Point, New York is of a similar size to Blaine, and is located near the Canadian border, with many commuters going to nearby Montreal. The city approved a commuter train stop about 10 years ago, and after an initial burst of activity, passenger use slowed significantly. The station now averages about two passengers per train per day.

Though the students' involvement with the project ends with the completion of the class, they did offer suggestions to look into going forward. Sonnen recommended the city touch base with officials in Rouses Point to learn more about their strategies for implementing a new stop and challenges they've encountered. However, the usefulness of the comparison is questionable. Unlike Blaine, there is no large population centers near the New York town, and the distance to Montreal is much closer than the distance from Seattle to Blaine.

Sonnen suggested speaking with the local governments in Surrey and White Rock, which would likely have the largest ridership in B.C., to determine the level of interest in the station.



POSTED BY **STEVE GUNTLI**