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## Advocates push for passenger rail stop in Blaine

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By Jami Makan

Advocates of an Amtrak passenger rail stop in Blaine met over the weekend, but organizers cautioned that much work remains to be done before it becomes a reality.

A meeting hosted by rail advocacy group All Aboard Washington (AAWA) took place on July 13 at the Semiahmoo Resort. The turnout was high, with many in the audience arguing that an Amtrak passenger rail stop in Blaine is long overdue. On the Amtrak Cascades service, there are currently no stops between Fairhaven Station in Bellingham and Pacific Central Station in Vancouver, B.C.

The event featured presentations by Bruce Agnew, director of the Cascadia Center; Dr. Laurie Trautman, director of Western Washington University's Border Policy Research Institute (BPRI); and others. Audience members including Blaine city manager Michael Jones, Blaine mayor Bonnie Onyon, state representative Luanne Van Werven and White Rock city councilor Scott Kristjanson also addressed the gathering.

The consensus was that a rail stop in Blaine would not only serve north Whatcom County, but would also serve those living in southern B.C. According to statistics presented at the meeting, there are almost a million B.C. residents who live south of the Fraser River. "That's bigger than Snohomish County, which has three rail stops," said Agnew.

In order to determine how many of those B.C. residents would use a Blaine rail stop, the next step is for an "investment grade" ridership

study to be carried out, said Agnew. The study would address the requirements of the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) in terms of new station development, measuring potential ridership through surveys of Washington and B.C. residents.

In order to fund the research, AAWA and the Cascadia Center will draft a scope of work and a potential budget, which they plan to bring to state legislators and the governor during the next legislative session, which begins in January. In the meantime, the advocacy groups plan to continue building partnerships across the border through the Cascadia Innovation Corridor Conference, which meets in Seattle in early October.

Besides the ridership study, there are several other steps that need to be taken. For example, conversations are needed with BNSF Railway, in order to ensure that there is no impact to freight trains from expanding the Amtrak Cascades service. Upgrades are needed between the New Westminster bridge and downtown Vancouver in order to reduce overall travel time. And a newly approved preclearance agreement needs to be implemented, allowing CBP agents to conduct southbound rail passenger inspections in Vancouver.

A station would also need to be constructed in Blaine, although Agnew said that this is the least of their concerns; all that is needed is a handicap accessible platform with adequate parking and lighting.

Agnew estimates that a Blaine rail stop won't be approved until 2021 or 2022 at the earliest. In the meantime, he said the best thing that people can do is write to their legislators and the governor to express support for a Blaine rail stop. "We are going to need letters from folks in Birch Bay and Semiahmoo and Blaine to their legislators and to their governor, saying that the Blaine station makes a lot of sense," he said. "We also need a parallel effort from White Rock and Surrey citizens."

Despite the hurdles that still need to be overcome, some in the audience warned against overcomplicating the issue. "You don't have a difficult problem here," said Louis Musso III, one of the meeting's attendees. "You already have the train. You already have the track. You just have to make it stop."



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