

GALVESTON'S HISTORIC UNION DEPOT

A ONCE AND FUTURE GREAT STATION

By Scott Bogren

Galveston, Texas's Shearn Moody Plaza is one of only two remaining art-deco buildings in this island city on the Gulf of Mexico. Its 11 stories tower grandly above much of the city's famous Strand, a reminder of Galveston's rich history.

Shearn Moody Plaza has a central place in both Galveston's past — and future. Its ground floor contains the former Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad's Union Passenger Depot, complete with the original vaulted ceiling, marble pillars and mahogany passenger benches. Thousands of people once came to Galveston via the five tracks behind the nearly 100-year-old station, as grooves worn in the marble floor in front of the ticket window attest. Today the station, which is also home to the Galveston Island Railroad Museum, is set to become part of a multi-modal transit gateway that local officials hope will spur economic development by offering residents and tourists alike mobility alternatives conveniently located downtown. A once and future Great Station.

Just across 25th Street from the Plaza, planning is underway for an intermodal station for the city's transit bus and trolley services. Nostalgic trolleys that run along the Strand, waterfront and past the largest local employer — the University of Texas Medical Branch — will visit the station every 15 minutes and all of Island Transit's (the city's public transit operator) radial bus lines will pulse out of the new facility every 15 to 30 minutes. Taken together, the historic station and the innovative new facility are a back-to-the-future entryway into Galveston.

"Galveston's future is based upon better mobility linkages," says Barry Goodman, president of

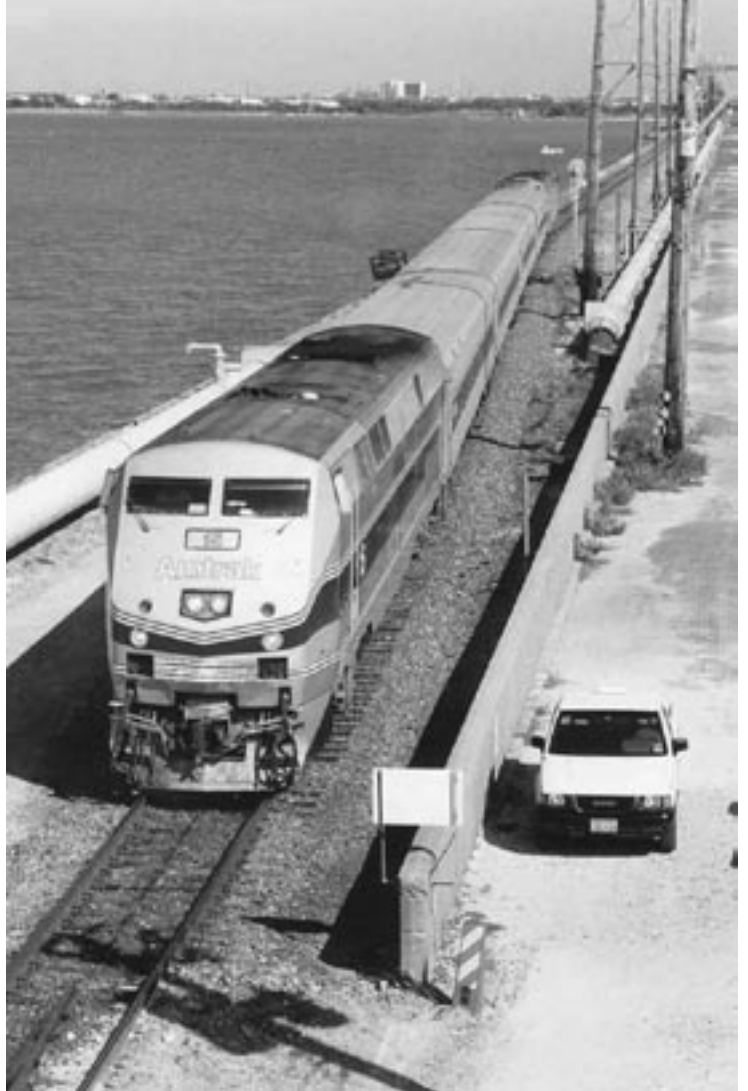


Galveston's original Union Depot.

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The Texas Gullfiner crosses over Galveston Bay and onto the island.

Below, renewed passenger rail service to the station (background) is part of the plan.



Photos by Don Harper

the Goodman Corporation, the city's transportation consultant. "And this improved transportation will attract both business and residential development."

A City of Firsts

Galveston has a rich history steeped in transportation. Throughout much of the 19th century, the Queen City of the Gulf, as it was known, was a thriving port welcoming goods and people from around the world. Originally chartered in 1839, the area's geography made it a natural site for a city, and a booming one at that. Prior to 1900, the city was one of Texas's most populous and its growth centered around the banks, cotton traders, hotels, mills and railroads that populated the Strand District.

Among the many firsts for Texas that occurred in Galveston are several transportation-related events, including the state's first public streetcar service begun in 1868 with horses and mules, later electrified in 1893. Texas's first railroad locomotive entered the state in Galveston in 1852. Two years later, the Galveston, Houston and Henderson Railroad was chartered, the state's oldest living rail line.

The city used several makeshift railroad stations beginning in the 1860s to welcome visitors, until construction began on Galveston's first Union Station in 1874, in the vicinity of 25th Street and the Strand, where the current station still stands. The original four-story red brick station served as a symbol of the city's prosperity.

That prosperity ended suddenly for Galveston on September 8, 1900, when an enormous hurricane struck without warning. In what remains today the deadliest natural disaster in U.S. history, more than 6,000 people died and nearly 10,000 were left homeless. A third of the city was destroyed.



Soon afterward a giant seawall, 16 feet tall and 17 feet wide, was built along the city's vulnerable gulf shore and buildings throughout the city were raised. In 1913, a new rail station, the current eight-story structure, was completed. Eighteen years later an 11-story north tower was added to the station complex.

Indeed, Galveston rebuilt itself for years, but it never regained the prominence it held prior to the great hurricane. In 1914 Houston's ship channel was deepened, diverting much of the lucrative shipping trade away from

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Galveston. The die was cast, Galveston's future was that of a seaside resort.

In its heyday, the Union Depot welcomed thousands of travelers every year to Galveston. As such, it was a distinctive and classic entryway. Just off the station's main floor was a Harvey House restaurant (the Harvey Girls stayed down the street) and a grove of oleander trees adorned an area nearby the platforms and baggage and express buildings. In the floors above the station, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe (AT&SF) conducted business with corporate offices.

By the 1960s, however, passenger business for the AT&SF was waning. The railroad transferred much of the corporate and administrative functions away from the Union Depot.

Theory, History and Opportunity

By Barry Goodman

During the last several decades, where substantial federal investment has been available to support improvements to community-based transit systems, there has been limited emphasis on the benefits of developing community-based transit stations and facilities. Other capital needs, like vehicles, have often and for obvious reasons been the focus of these transit systems. But stations and facilities can add value to both transit system objectives, as well as community-based economic development and revitalization.

Many transit systems concentrate on essentials of bus replacement and improvements to key transit stops, as well as maintaining a viable investment base to continue basic transit services. The success experienced by many communities due to their recent development of transit stations and facilities in local communities is evidence that these facilities represent new partnerships. Resources of value can then be the catalyst for meaningful improvements in neighborhoods surrounding the transit terminal facility complex.

We encourage this type of transit facility related revitalization because we know it will be a catalyst not

only for increased ridership due to the environmental and aesthetic improvements for potential transit riders, but a catalyst for community economic development resulting from the revitalization possible through transit terminal facility development. Since, in the case of Galveston, its downtown area is a critical aspect of its economic base due to the tourism orientation, the transit terminal facility-related revitalization provides Galveston with multiple benefits all resulting from facility development.

The city of Galveston is currently developing an intermodal community-based Great Station that will bring together existing bus, rail trolley, cruise ship and future passenger rail connections between Galveston Island and the mainland. This facility has been the catalyst for community revitalization largely by federal investment through the Federal Transit Administration's Livable Communities Initiative program. This program utilizes federal regulations, which enable a transit system to improve and revitalize pedestrian pathways and connections within a 1,500-foot radius of any transit terminal facility. This radius enables improvements to approximately 16 square blocks around a transit

terminal, which include new sidewalks, street lighting, way finding, landscaping, street furniture, and even public art.

Galveston is just one such example of innovative, community-based station design in Texas. In the case of the city of El Paso and its Sun Metro Transit System, multiple community and economic development-related benefits are occurring from its Union Plaza Transit Terminal/Parking Facility, which is assisting the revitalization of downtown El Paso. This facility, which will provide a terminal for Sun Metro's rubber tire trolley system, will also provide 12,000 sq. ft. of retail space, as well as 450 parking spaces now paid for with federal investment. The existence of the facility has enabled the City of El Paso/Sun Metro to utilize federal investment to revitalize the surrounding historic residential community, as well as an adjacent warehouse area, which has significant entertainment potential. The developing new downtown terminal is already creating the interest of the private sector toward investing in new housing, retail space, and entertainment venues knowing that the terminal will provide added mobility and its parking, in the evenings, added space to accommodate event and entertainment

The last passenger train departed Galveston on April 10, 1967. The future of the Union Depot was immediately threatened as a decade of neglect and vacancy put it on a short list for demolition.

The structure was saved by a local philanthropic group — The Moody Foundation — in 1978. Mary Moody Northern felt that Galveston should recognize the historic significance of the building and the city's contribution to Texas's rich transportation history. The renovation of the art-deco treasure also served to jump start Galveston's revitalization of the Historic Strand and Seaport District, now listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The foundation then transferred title of the building to a newly created

nonprofit corporation known as Shearn Moody Plaza, Inc. The ground floor and rail yards were given to the Center for Transportation and Commerce for the purposes of preserving the old depot and maintaining a collection of historic railroad rolling stock and related artifacts and exhibits. The Center for Transportation and Commerce now does business as the Galveston Island Railroad Museum and Terminal and is recognized as the largest and most complete museum of its kind in the Southwestern U.S.

On the floors above the museum and depot, the public-private partnership of this great station becomes evident. The Port of Galveston, district social service offices and county offices all call the station home, as well.

venues. The Union Plaza transit-parking terminal will also provide space for museum-related activities and assist other nonprofit entities in meeting their objectives.

Community-based transit terminal facilities can be developed to assist very small communities, as well as larger communities. In the case of Greenville, Texas, where the Hunt County Community on Aging provides community-based demand-response services, a new transit facility complex is being developed that will provide a multiplicity of community benefits. The new facility will not only house the agency's transit administration and provide space for existing and future transit operations. Numerous partners will also be sharing space in the new facility. These largely nonprofit community-based service organization partners support the local elderly and disabled community and will become joint partners in a facility designed to accommodate related social service agency objectives that enhance transit patronage, as well as the entire community.

Because community-based transit terminal facilities have so much potential to benefit the surrounding

neighborhoods, they create the opportunity for new partnerships. City Public Works Departments, which have budgeted funds for improvements surrounding the transit facility may be able to reduce the amount of local tax-based support due to the availability of federal investment. Private developers who own property in the vicinity of a transit facility are potential joint development partners due to the facility's existence and ability to attract users to new retail and commercial development — which in turn creates additional ridership for the transit system.

Experience indicates that locally based transit terminal facilities are positioned to provide a multiplicity of benefits to the surrounding community and, in turn, take advantage of other resources that traditionally would not be available to support public transportation. The end result is that transit initiatives can have a broader impact and importance to the communities within which they exist through the development of a locally based transit stations and facilities.

Arriving on Track 1

"This historic depot shows people how transportation once worked in Galveston, and how it will work again," says John Dundee, the station's caretaker and museum director. "The last regularly scheduled passenger train left Galveston on April 10, 1967, and many here thought that would be the end of it. Not so fast."

Indeed, Amtrak, the Texas Department of Transportation and the Union Pacific — along with federal investment sponsored by U.S. Rep. Nick Lampson — have launched two demonstrations of re-vamped passenger train services, once last Labor Day and again during Mardi Gras in February. Dubbed the Texas Gulfliner, the trains connecting League City (mid-way between Houston and Galveston) with Galveston have run at more than 75 percent capacity and offer an alternative to Galveston's parking restrictions and holiday weekend traffic.

"We hope to introduce regularly scheduled service with, eventually, an extension to Houston," says an Amtrak official.

"We think the demonstration can lead to a permanent commuter rail operation along the Gulfliner corridor," concurs Goodman.

The nexus of renewed transportation alternatives — passenger rail's potential combined with the city's

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Gulfliner passengers stream into Union Depot.



successful trolley, bus and cruise line operations — signals new transportation opportunities for Galveston. And local elected officials and businesses are keen on translating these opportunities into economic development. Indeed, mobility has always played a central role in the city's history.

A Working Museum to Transportation

The Union Depot's waiting room is as beautiful and classic today as it ever was. In addition to its utility as a multi-modal transportation facility, the station is a gem of a museum. Collections of rare and valuable passenger rail memorabilia like china and schedules that recall the station's glory years are on display. In fact, the Renfert railroad china collection is reputed to be one of the largest in the U.S. Out back, alongside the platforms, sits an unusual collection of 42 freight and passenger rail cars. An original Sam Houston Zephyr car is in the collection as is the Glen Fee Pullman coach, one of the original cars on the United States Freedom Train operated during the administration of Harry Truman. Both diesel and steam locomotives representing several eras of rail history in the Museum's collection now call Galveston home.

Of great concern to Dundee is the long-term care of these, "carbon steel works of public art" now stored in the open-air rail yard.

"The original museum planning did not take into account the effect of Galveston's salt air on these masterpieces,"

says Dundee. The museum's current Board of Directors has recognized this fact and plans are underway for a fundraising campaign to save the collection by housing the rolling stock in an indoor facility.

Since its inception, the museum, which is operated out of several former railroad maintenance buildings adjacent to the Union Depot, has attracted more than a million visitors.

History Arrives – Daily

Island Transit, the city's public transportation operator, serves Shearn Moody Plaza and the Union Depot with both trolley and transit bus service. In fact, the agency is in the

process of purchasing land directly across the street from the Plaza for a new intermodal terminal for both its buses and trolleys.

The trolleys were reintroduced to Galveston after a nearly 50-year absence in 1987 with a 4.5-mile loop that stops directly at the Plaza. Then, in 1996, an additional half-mile loop was added to incorporate additional tourist areas. Another extension is now in the works

Island Transit's General Manager, Wayne Cook, acknowledges that tourists are attracted to the trolley, but hopes the



Photos by Don Harper

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planned extension to the line to serve the University of Texas's Medical Branch, which employs 14,000 people, will attract more local riders.

"The trolleys are popular here, but our new line will add more commuters and passengers to the line," says Cook.

Amtrak's demonstration service, the Texas Gulfliner serves the Union Depot and is attracting serious passenger loads. Over the Labor Day weekend last year more than 3,000 passengers rode the Gulfliner to-and-from League City to Galveston. They disembarked at the Union Depot. In February for Mardi Gras, another 5,000 rode the train. The Galveston Island Railroad Museum is helping to lead the fight to reinstate passenger rail service to the island and this excursion service helps prove the point.

"The Gulfliner is proving to everyone involved that passenger rail between Houston and Galveston makes sense," says Dundee. "And when they arrive here, many of the riders take the trolley or a bus to their final destinations. It's great to see the old station brought back to life when that train pulls up to the station. Our motto has become, History Arrives Daily."

Trains and buses aren't the only way people are getting to Galveston's Union Depot. Both Carnival and Royal Caribbean offer cruise service directly out of Galveston bound for Mexico, the Cayman Islands and even Key West, Fla. By some accounts, Galveston is now the third most popular cruise line departure area in the U.S. The dock where these cruise lines arrive is two short blocks from the Plaza and, according to Dundee, many visitors to the Rail Museum are right off one of these mammoth ships.

"No sooner does one of those large ships dock, then I have visitors to the station," says Dundee. "And, again, they typically hop on the trolley from here."

According to officials with Carnival, Galveston is one of their "fastest growing" ports of departure with its proximity to the Houston metropolitan area.

Born on the Island

In Galveston, historical preservation and tradition are a way of daily life. If you were born and raised in Galveston, you're known as "BOI" or Born On the Island. And one can expect every BOI to tell you just how many generations of their family have lived there — Dundee's children are 5th general Galvestonians.

Public transportation in Texas, in its many forms, also was, in many ways, BOI. Perhaps that's why Shearn Moody Plaza and its Union Passenger Depot and railroad museum occupy such a central location on the island, and such a central place in the area's future. This Great Station brings together several modes of transport, public-private partnerships, attractions and history. In Galveston, intermodalism on such a grand scale seems only fitting. 🚗