

ASTA Enters Era of PTC on Capital Metro's Railroad

The Capital Metro Railroad, on which ASTA has operated its excursion trains for 27 years, is, like almost every other railroad in the nation, busily involved in implementing Positive Train Control (PTC) on the 32 miles of track where its commuter trains operate.

PTC is a complex electronic system designed to stop a train automatically before certain kinds of accidents occur, particularly train-to-train collisions, overspeed derailments, movement through mis-aligned switches or malfunctioning grade crossings, and unauthorized entry into work zones. Using trackside circuits, onboard computers and global-positioning technology, the system can warn and then stop a train if such a situation arises.

PTC will be required in Metro's commuter territory from downtown Austin to just beyond Leander, but not on the western part of the railroad used for freight and excursion trains.

Since ASTA's home terminal in Cedar Park is inside Metro's commuter territory, its trains as they go west operate over 5.5 miles of the track where PTC is being installed. With the assistance of Metro management, however, the Federal Railroad Administration has granted ASTA a PTC exemption, enabling us to operate locomotives without PTC equipment. The ex-

emption is welcome news for ASTA, as the installation for even a single engine is in serious six-figure territory. The exemption does come with conditions: primarily, ASTA will not be able to operate more than two trains a day over the PTC territory, nor make any moves in that segment longer than 20 miles in one direction.

According to Brian Smith, ASTA's hard-working liaison with Metro on PTC and other issues, Metro has made sufficient progress in implementing PTC in the westernmost segment of the commuter territory, "they received a two-year extension from the FRA, giving them until Dec. 31, 2020 to fully implement PTC throughout the Central Subdivision (from Leander to downtown Austin)."

Before the FRA will fully sign off on the PTC installation, however, Metro will have to successfully complete a "revenue service demonstration," testing the equipment on the westernmost part of the commuter territory (where the Cedar Park Yard is located) and documenting that it works on the other four segments of the line.

Says Brian, "This demonstration involves a commuter train making hundreds of trips in a row from one end of the territory to the other, with paying customers onboard, without any PTC mal-



2018 North Pole Flyer Season Was a Jolly Success

ASTA's schedule of *North Pole Flyers*, our festive holiday trains, have become the most popular part of the railroad's annual offering, and this past season was no exception. More than 11,600 passengers enjoyed this season's *Flyers* (making 43 per cent of the year's ticket revenues!). Working around PTC testing, 24 of the 36 *Flyers* operated between Bertram and Burnet, an innovation that worked smoothly and will be repeated in 2019. Make plans to join Santa, Ms. Claus, singers, storytellers and all the holiday treats next season!

functions. If a malfunction occurs, it must be corrected and then the demonstration can begin again, starting over with trip No. 1."

Testing leading up to the revenue-service demonstration has had a significant effect on ASTA's schedule this year. Commuter trains and excursion (or freight) trains are not allowed to share the same track territory at the same time, so scheduling the intense commuter-train testing on weekends has been complicated.

Metro management has been creative and coopera-

tive in letting ASTA maintain operation of at least one train a weekend, but a significant number of planned runs had to be annulled, necessitating some revenue belt-tightening.

According to Brian, ASTA is hopeful that a more normal schedule can be resumed at an early date. "Once the FRA gives its approval for RSD to begin (expected mid-April or earlier), our operations should return to normal, since the RSD will take place Monday through Friday during regular commuter service." (Bugs in the system, of course, could alter this schedule).

Thanks to our generous friends!

(Donations from October through December 2018. If we have left anyone off, please accept our apologies and contact us at director@austinsteamtrain.org so we can make sure we recognize you in our next edition.)

Big-Hearted Sponsors Made Holiday Trains a Success

ASTA couldn't have pulled off its successful holiday season without the generosity of our sponsors Cedar Park Fun (more than \$19,000 for entertainers and wooden whistles), HEB (\$5,000 in check and gift cards to underwrite some costs of the event), and Hyatt Place (hosting a \$5,000 volunteer event in April). ASTA and more than 11,000 happy passengers **thank you!**



We'd Love to See Your Name Here!

For building and investing in the future of historic railroad preservation in Central Texas, ASTA depends on the kindness and dedication of its friends! To make a donation or sign up as an ASTA member, call 512-477-8468 or visit our website, www.austinsteamtrain.org.

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(in honor of Brian Smith)

2019 Day Out With Thomas Tickets Available Now!

"Day Out With Thomas," the popular family-themed annual event starring Thomas the Tank Engine of storybook and television fame, will be Sept. 28 and 29 in Burnet, and tickets are on sale at the ASTA website, www.austinsteamtrain.org, or by calling 866-468-7630.

Operating from the Bur-

net Community Center, this year's event (with the theme "Steam Team Tour") will be Thomas' 16th visit to ASTA's rails. Tickets are \$24 apiece for everyone two years and older.

Centerpiece of the event, of course, will be 25-minute train rides, a dozen each day, behind the smoking, whistling

full-scale version of Thomas.

But there will be plenty of other family-friendly activities, including coloring and crafts, storytelling and videos, a rock-climbing wall, a magician and balloon artist, a selection of Thomas souvenirs and the opportunity to have a photo made with the famous little blue engine!

Foreman Chris Hoff Takes the Reins as The Railroad's General Superintendent

Chris Hoff, who has ably served as the Austin & Texas Central's mechanical foreman since August, 2017, has been promoted to general superintendent, in charge of the railroad's operations.

Since joining ASTA's staff, Chris has vigorously taken charge of the many maintenance, repair and restoration tasks required for smooth operation of the railroad, to which he'll now be adding supervisory and regulatory responsibilities.

A Nebraska native, Chris had had extensive experience in railcar repair, railroad operations, welding and all manner of mechanical skills before taking over in ASTA's Cedar Park yard.

Prior to his coming to Texas, he had worked for six years for Savage Services Corporation, performing car and locomotive repairs at a coal-fired power plant in Wheatland, Wyo. Previously, he'd also had railroad-related duties at the Western Sugar Co. in Scottsbluff, Neb. Chris also attended Western Nebraska Community College in Scottsbluff.

Chris' wife Erin has ably served as ASTA's volunteer coordinator since November, 2017, and they have a daughter, Charlie.

Chris' talents also go beyond railroading. He is an ac-



complished musician (guitar and vocals) who performs regularly at several Central Texas venues and has recently released an album of his songs, "It Doesn't Matter."

(And we don't use the headline "takes the reins" lightly; Chris is also an experienced horseman.)

ASTA's 2019 budget also contemplates hiring an additional person in the yard to help Chris with mechanical and operational duties.

Popular Volunteer Brian Blades Departs at 70

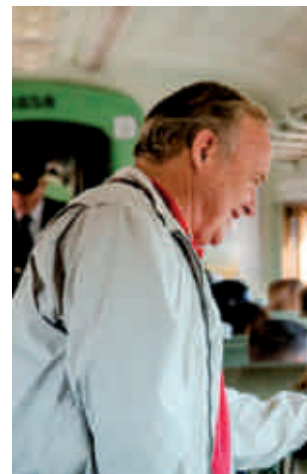
Brian Blades, whose ready smile, cheerful demeanor and readiness to help endeared him both to A&TC passengers and to his fellow volunteers, died at his home in Cedar Park on Feb. 5 at the age of 70.

Brian had frequently served as an onboard-service volunteer since September, 2013, and made the journeys of thousands of A&TC passengers a pleasant and unforgettable experience.

His friend and mentor Linda McDonough, an onboard-service crew chief, recalled that Brian "was great with passengers and his fellow volunteers. He will be sorely missed."

She recalled that shortly after he had been recruited as a volunteer by Barbara and Ray Clow, he stepped into an empty assignment as a lounge-car attendant and carried it off without missing a beat.

He was born in Houston, earned a bachelor of science degree from Stephen F. Austin State Uni-



versity and served in the Navy from 1971 to 1975.

In Houston, Brian founded and managed BCO Delivery Service for 30 years before retiring to Cedar Park. In addition to his ASTA volunteer service, he was an enthusiastic scuba diver and off-road explorer, and was active in supporting the Girl Scouts.

Brian's ashes were buried in the Houston National Cemetery.

He is survived by his daughter Ashley Martin, granddaughter Kayla and three siblings.

Power Car to Ensure Reliable Electricity for A&TC Trains Is On Its Way

A former "merchandise-service" boxcar which will carry a big 800-kilowatt Cummins generator to power all

the cars on ASTA's passenger trains has been purchased and will soon make its way to Cedar Park.

With a fully climate-controlled consist, a reliable source of electric power is essential for ASTA's operations, and the new car and generator will replace the current 150-kilowatt "head-end-power" generator (supplemented by a few single-car generators) that currently is at its practical working limit keeping the cars powered.

The former Missouri Pacific car, built in 1962, is being readied for its trip to Central Texas at Gateway Rail Service in Madison, Ill. ASTA's Chief Mechanical Officer, Jack Pearson, discovered both car and generator at Gateway and recommended them as a reliable solution for the trains' 480-volt power requirements.

The car will finish being readied for service in Cedar Park, at a cost of an additional \$21,350 to \$31,000.

A Special Thanks to Our Friends and Supporters,
the City of Cedar Park and Cedar Park Tourism Services!



ASTA's Railroad Is a Star of Indy Movie "Fugitive Dreams"

For a week in February, a three-mile stretch east of Bertram and parts of the Cedar Park Yard became the desolate setting for an independent film now in the works titled *Fugitive Dreams*.

For the scenes, in which the main characters--"two homeless people trying to survive in middle America"--are riding the rails in a dusty boxcar, ASTA assembled a four-car freight train which made multiple back-and-forth trips, plus some still shots in the yard.

Fugitive Dreams is a project of filmmaker Jason Neulander, based on a stage play, *Fugitive Pieces*, by Caridad Svich. According to the film's publicity, "when John accidentally thwarts Mary's suicide

attempt they become mismatched traveling companions on a journey that leads to grace, compassion, forgiveness, and, ultimately, love."

Actor Robbie Tann plays John and April Matthis plays Mary.

Neulander is doubtless most known as the creator of *The Intergalactic Nemesis*, a '30s-style pulp-fiction story that turned into a stage show, radio play, comic series and finally a touring "live-action graphic novel."

For the railroad scenes at the heart of *Fugitive Dreams*, more than a dozen ASTA volunteers spent three full days moving the train back and forth at the Bertram shooting location, then three days filming static scenes in the Cedar



Assistant Director Sol Bachman and Director Jason Neulander consult with Stars April Matthis and Robbie Tann between shots in the boxcar that became a set for "Fugitive Dreams." (Larry Springer photo.)

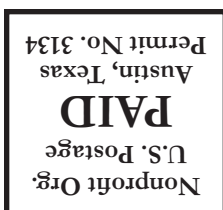
Park Yard. The railroad's efforts were organized, coordinated and supervised by ASTA President Dr. Robert Schoen, and Capital Metro assisted with necessary arrangements for the shooting and deadhead moves.

The train's consist included a Chicago & Northwestern boxcar, a Southern Pacific

boxcar (in which the scenes were staged), a Katy flatcar, a Santa Fe cabooses and two coaches for the comfort of cast and crew.

ASTA's equipment and location have figured in a number of movie projects over the years, most notably in *The Newton Boys* (1998) and *Courage Under Fire* (1996).

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