

# The fight begins: Saving the old Alton Train Station

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**ALTON** - By the end of this summer, Altonians will have a chance to hop on a new high-speed rail line and reach Chicago by train in about four hours from a top-of-the-line station located near **Homer Adams Parkway**.

But, what will happen to the old train station, which has served the community for more than 50 years? If **Alton Area Landmarks Association President Terry Sharp** has any say, it will continue to be a destination for visitors and residents alike, and he is not

alone in that sentiment. A group has recently burst onto the scene on Facebook, called **Save the Alton Train Station**. It was started by Altonian **Jennifer Campbell**, who made the page (currently boasting nearly 200 members) after seeing how many of her fellow social media users were commenting about the station.

"I was on a page called '**You Knew You Grew Up In Alton When...**,' which is full of lots of nostalgia and memories of growing up in the area," she said. "The train station came up quite a few times. People brought up buildings that should have been saved. Some people wanted an entire page dedicated to the train station. I was really surprised by how many people joined up. There are a lot of people interested in the old train station. We're collecting the interest of people in the old train station. Mine is a pretty small part."

Campbell said she does not have many memories of the old train station, but said she loves the architecture of old train stations, stating they catch her eyes wherever she goes.

She was very surprised by the growth of her page, which gained members at the rate of a snowball rolling down a mountain. Within the first few days of its existence, Campbell said more than 100 people had joined her page and many were participating in the discussion.

**Kenneth Hetge**, who currently resides in Tehachapi, Calif., posted a memory involving a former U.S. President.

"I remember that evening well... the Gerald Ford "whistle stop" on Oct. 16, 1976," he wrote on the group's page. "I remember my Dad saying, 'let's go see the president and hear what he has to say.' Off to the station we went."

Ford was one of several U.S. presidents who have stopped through Alton on similar tours.

Even with so much positive sentiment, saving the old train station may prove to be an insurmountable herculean task. It cannot stay at its current location, due to the proximity of the tracks, so it has to be moved. Sharp said the building itself is on sale for \$1 from **Union Pacific Railroad**, but the moving expenses could be a small fortune.

"People freak out when they hear that - moving a building - but it is a very doable thing," he said. "The cost depends on where it would be moved to; the farther away, the more expensive."

Sharp said **Expert House Movers**, a building moving service based in St. Louis, has an entire portion of their website dedicated to moving historic buildings. He said the

company would cut off the building, jack it up and put it on wheels. The real issues, he said, would be raising power lines near the building and establishing a route. The size of the building would ensure it could not go under overpasses, such as the one on College Avenue directly adjacent to it. Sharp said movers could also possibly load it directly onto a rail car and take it to a new location.

He added the city is working on a marketing plan for the train station through **Alton Development and Housing Director Greg Caffey**. That marketing plan will be debuted to the February meeting of the Alton Area Landmarks Association, which will take place at a location and time to be determined, Sharp said. He said he hopes the city could move it to a city-owned location, such as the former site of Great Central Lumber, which was going to be used for a hotel on the riverfront.

"There doesn't seem to be any interest in integrating the old station into the new one," Sharp said. "I think a suitable spot for it would be downtown. The city already owns where **Great Central Lumber** used to be, and there are train tracks down there. We could talk about it being a visitor's center."

Both Sharp and Campbell are waiting for the city's marketing plan to move forward with any current ideas. Sharp believes it is important for a city to preserve its old train stations, however.

"People have both happy and sad memories there," he said. "People going to weddings, college students coming here and going home and people going to war came and went through there."

Alton mayoral candidate **Scott Dixon** also supports Sharp and Campbell's effort to save the old station. Much of his campaign is dedicated to both the progress of Alton and the preservation of its history. He sent a statement to Riverbender.com regarding the sentiment to save the old station.

"Part of what makes Alton great is its history," he said in an email. "Alton has shot itself in the foot so many times by allowing so many of our priceless old buildings to be torn down without much thought. Galena has become one of Illinois' top tourist attractions by embracing their history, and Alton could do the same. If I were mayor, I would have already been out there publicly soliciting ideas about what to do with it. Perhaps the old station could be moved to a spot near the Wadlow statue, or by the history museum, and turned into an exhibit on Alton's rail and steamboat history, as well as a coffee shop for the students and local residents. Other Altonians may have better ideas, and I'm glad that Riverbender is publicizing this issue, so people can share their ideas."

Sharp echoed Dixon's sentiments in an early morning interview on Wednesday, Jan. 11.

"You lose buildings by accident, by fire, by lightning and by owner neglect," he said.  
"These brick buildings are lost all the time. They're not building any more 150-year-old buildings. These historic buildings are all we have left."

Riverbender.com will continue to cover this issue and will update future stories with the perspectives of the current city administration, Union Pacific Railroad and any other interested parties. Anyone with a memory, photograph, idea or perspective to share is invited to contact reporter Cory Davenport at (618) 419-3046 or via email at [cory@riverbender.com](mailto:cory@riverbender.com).