

Quest to save old Alton Train Station may be derailed due to restraints

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - The [quest to save the old Alton Train Station](#) may be much tougher of a battle than it originally seemed, and it never appeared to be easy.

Restraints from Union Pacific Railroad, which owns the property, coupled with the herculean task of moving the building are making the future of the old Alton Train Station, which is still in use until the [new train station](#) opens ([due to happen this coming summer](#)), seem very bleak. Alton Area Landmarks Association (AALA) President Terry

Sharp said his organization has partnered with a [Facebook group](#) started by Alton native Jennifer Campbell to try to save the old station, but said things are looking more desperate as time passes.

When asked about the likelihood of saving the station, Sharp said, "I'm not going to give percentages. I'm giving it the old college try. If we do nothing, it will be torn down and lost. We came in kind of late in the game, and they get grant money for new things and new development, but there is never any grant money to re-purpose the old. Community leaders need to think of these things earlier in the process."

The first major issue with saving the old Alton Train Station is that it needs to be moved away from its current location near the tracks off College Avenue. That process will require money and great effort. Before that process can even begin its early stages, however, Sharp said someone needs to buy the station and think of a new purpose for the building.

Whoever buys the building, however, will not have to spend that much money. Union Pacific has offered the building for \$1, but said it would only allow it to be sold to a 501(c)3 organization, which greatly limits the entities able to purchase the building. Sharp said it completely eliminates the possibility of a private individual purchasing the building and funding its move.

Assuming a 501(c)3 organization lays claim to the building and has the funds to move it, the new station requires a location. Sharp said he would like to see it located in a place suitable for a train station, such as adjacent to railroad tracks. He even offered an idea for it to be re-purposed near the new train station, acting as a possible coffee shop or magazine store.

"It's too bad it could not be integrated into the new train station development as a coffee shop, magazine store or have some displays in there about railroads in Alton," he said. "Every time I've brought that up, I've never gotten enthusiasm from the city about that. Wherever it's moved should be an appropriate place for the train station to sit."

Alton Mayor Brant Walker said the city's "hands are tied" with restrictions set upon the property by the railroad. He said it "was going to be a challenge" to get the station moved to a new location given the time constraints and other restrictions.

Those time constraints began as nearly impossible when Sharp believed the community had as long as a year to move the station following its closure. Unfortunately, Sharp said the community will only have a matter of months before the station gets demolished, which will be funded by federal grants.

"We're always brought in at the tail end of things with no resources or time, and then people complain when they lose the old buildings," Sharp said. "We have a lot of community support behind us, and most towns, if they don't save anything else, at least save their train stations, but it's a big task."

[The City of Alton developed a marketing brochure](#) for potential buyers of the train station, but Sharp said the situation is looking much worse now that it was revealed they only have a few months for that marketing assistance instead of a full year.

Sharp said the train station is worth saving due to memories people have of it there.

"As it's being talked about, people are sharing their memories," he said. "They've left town, come into town, said goodbye there. It's a point where emotions have happened; happy or sad. People have remembered this place. It's important. It's somewhere people have memories tied to."

"It's a train station. It looks like a train station. It functions as a train station."

Alton Mayoral candidate, Scott Dixon, shared Sharp's views on the station when asked for a comment in January 2017.

"Part of what makes Alton great is its history," Dixon 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."

While Sharp does not blame the current administration for the current struggle to save the old Alton Train Station, he did say whatever administration in Alton's future should be more cognizant of old structures during new projects, and encouraged proactive measures instead of grassroots efforts chained to impossible clocks counting down to zero faster and faster.

"It's too late to be complaining about it now, but I feel compelled to bring it up, so in the future, when new things are brought up, we should pay just as much attention to what to do with the old as we do what we're doing with the new," Sharp said.

