

The Hamilton Spectator Nov 30, 2011

Ho Ho Ho Holiday Train

CP Rail has had its troubles of late, including ballooning pension costs on its books and the potential takeover of the 130-year-old Canadian institution by an American shareholder activist.

It's been accused of not keeping up with other railways — most notably its rival Canadian National — in updating its rolling stock over the past few years.

But then there's CP's Holiday Train, its diesel-fuelled panacea for waning Christmas spirit and the joy of every child who has been raised on the whimsy of Thomas the Tank Engine and his friends on Sodor Island.

The 14-car train, decorated with hundreds of thousands of Christmas lights, made its eighth visit to Hamilton on Tuesday night, pulling into the Kinnear rail yard on Lawrence Road, just across from Gage Park, for a half-hour visit.

It brought in entertainment — singers Sydney Grigg and Willy Porter, plus Santa Claus and railway buff Mayor Bob Bratina — but also transported a message of help for the needy by collecting food donations for the Greater Hamilton Food Share (including a \$3,000 donation from CP Rail and its employees).

And, hey, was that Santa played by community activist Matt Jelly? Yes, it was.

"This is our biggest community relations event," said CP spokesperson Lauren Tonc when asked if financial troubles might ever derail the Holiday Train.

"It's important to our employees. It's something we all have a piece of our heart in."

Tonc noted the train ran during the Christmas season in 2008 when there was danger of a depression. She said the rail company was "adamant about keeping the train running."

More than 2,000 people came out to see the Holiday Train, packing Lawrence Road between Gage Avenue South and Rothsay Avenue. Tonc said the train's Hamilton appearance always brings out one of its largest crowds.

There were moms and dads, young and old, and hundreds of people sported cameras to try and catch that just oh-so perfect picture of the train arriving for its visit.

A hush went over the crowd when the eastbound train's headlight cut through the darkness, followed by streams of colourful Christmas lights. The loudspeaker blared White Christmas.

Bill Ritchie, 46, a heavy equipment operator, was making his third visit to see the train. He was accompanied by his five-year-old grandson Adam, who was seeing the train for the first time.

Ritchie, who dropped off a donation at the food share depot, said he comes every year to enjoy “the spirit of giving.”

“You got a good cause going here, dropping off food for people who need it,” he said. “It’s the gift of giving.”

Rachel O’Reilly, resource development director for Hamilton Food Share, called the train and its visit “absolutely amazing.” By the time the train left at about 8:30 p.m., Food Share had collected one ton of food. Jelly — er, Santa — walked through the crowd gathering food donations.

“It is the true meaning of Christmas,” said O’Reilly. “When you see this crowd, when you see people from every walk of life — everyone is coming for the free show — but also actually bringing food and money to help people in our community.”

Nestor Font, 41, a porter at the Hamilton General Hospital, and his daughter Savannah, 7, were both making their second visit to the Holiday Train.

“Last year was just phenomenal,” said Font. “There were so many people here. They put on a really good show and there are just nice lights on the Holiday Train.”

Savannah declared, “It’s just cool and I like how Santa came last year.”

Hamiltonians can get another glimpse of the Holiday Train Wednesday.

The train parked overnight at the Aberdeen rail yard and is set to leave for Cambridge between 2 and 2:30 p.m. It will follow the CP line over Highway 403, through Waterdown and Carlisle, to Guelph Junction.