

Choo, choo! Old 2926 is pulling out

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By Frank Zoretich

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Old 2926, a 500-ton steam locomotive that hadn't moved an inch in 44 years, rolled forward again very, very slowly to the cheers of more than 100 spectators.

Then it stopped. Then it moved again. Then it stopped. Then it moved. Then it stopped. Then it moved. Then it stopped. And so on.

By 2:30 p.m. Friday, most of the locomotive's bulk was protruding into the middle of Second Street Northwest at I-40, adjacent to Coronado Park, where it has rested as a city historic landmark since 1956.

Old 2926 was built powerful enough to run at 100 mph when it was a workhorse for the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway in the 1940s and early 1950s.

But on Friday it wasn't moving under its own power. It was being towed by a big tractor along temporary sections of track.

The New Mexico Steam Locomotive and Railroad Historical Society bought Old 2926 from the city last year and hired Messer Construction Co. of Hereford, Texas, to ease it along on the first leg of its journey toward a new life.

The society's members intend to put the locomotive back into full working order and use it for tourist-attracting steam excursions.

But the rehabilitation of Old 2926 is expected to take several years and an estimated \$2 million.

The society is seeking donations to help with the task, and did a brisk fund-raising business in the park Friday, selling T-shirts, coffee mugs and baseball caps with logos of the locomotive.

For now, however, 2926 is being moved only about two blocks on temporary sections of track being laid down as it goes. By 6 p.m., the locomotive and its attached tender had made it across First Street Northwest, and was chained down for the night.

Its continued route: east on Indian School Road and then, by no later than Sunday, north under I-40 to a siding along the main line of the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway.

From there, BNSF has agreed to move it sometime soon to a location, where society members can begin to work on it.

The society has said it hopes the site will be at the former steam-locomotive repair shops in the Barelás neighborhood, along the tracks several blocks south of Downtown.

A local nonprofit corporation called the Urban Council is buying the old repair shops property from the railroad with the intention of using the property and its historic buildings for a multi-use redevelopment called the New Mexico Exposition Center.

A new transportation museum called Wheels is to be part of that redevelopment project.

Before the locomotive started to leave Coronado Park behind, Albuquerque Jim Baca blew the locomotive's steam whistle, which had already been removed from 2926 and was connected to an air-compressor.

"Railroads made this town," Baca said. "That's why we're here today for this move."

Members of the city's Landmarks and Urban Conservation Commission also got to toot that whistle.

At its meeting last week, the commission gave its necessary approval for the move — but put off for the future this philosophical question:

When, someday not too long from now, Old 2926 is pulling an excursion train on tracks beyond the city limits, can it still properly be called a city landmark?



Frank Zoretich/Tribune

Engine 2926 inched forward out of Coronado Park, its berth for more than four decades, on Friday as workers for Messer Construction laid temporary track across Second Street Northwest. The 500-ton steam locomotive is being moved to a siding on the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe line and will later be moved again to a location where it can be restored to working order.