

The Vital Role that Museums, in General, and Freeman Station, in Particular, Play in Burlington

Thank you to all members of Council for this opportunity to say a few words regarding the future of Freeman Station.

It is appropriate to be discussing the railway museum in Burlington, as May is Museum Month across Ontario. Freeman Station is just one example of how museums support education and research! May 2024 is an opportunity to celebrate the vital contributions of museums in Ontario and particularly throughout the Burlington area. Museum Month coincides with International Museum Day on May 18th. This year's theme of 'Museums for Education and Research' is an opportunity to encourage all Ontarians to come together and highlight the pivotal role of museums in learning, innovation, and knowledge sharing!

Railways continue to play an important role in our city, our province and our country. In the 19th century, municipalities paid large sums of money to entice railway companies to lay track to their front doors. In 1853 our ancestors were lucky that the Great Western Railway Company decided to build what became known as Freeman Station. In 1988 that station was declared surplus. It was taken over by two successive private companies, but early in the 21st century they moved out. In order to preserve this historic building the City embarked on a lengthy search for a new home. In 2011 the Friends of Freeman Station was established, and they found a new home for the station. A three-part agreement was signed between the chemical company

that owned the land, the City that owned the building and the Friends of Freeman Station, which is a strictly volunteer charitable organization. This agreement gave the FOFS the responsibility to move and restore this last remaining Grand Trunk Railway station. However, the agreement was almost mute regarding the long-range operation of the station.

The move to its present location took place in 2013 and by Canada Day 2017 the main floor was restored allowing for the grand reopening of the station. Almost a thousand visitors toured the station on that day. For the next decade the FOFS held many Open House events. Step by step, other amenities were added, such as four pieces of rolling stock, thousands of artifacts, plus accessibility and safety aids. The property was landscaped to reflect a part of the original transportation centre that had grown up around the station.

Over the years, most of those out buildings were demolished by the railroad but are now on display as miniature models of the village of Freeman in 1920 in our award-winning diorama on the lower level. Early in 2023, Freeman Station was just beginning to rebound from Covid-19 and plans were underway to inaugurate an educational program aimed at elementary school students. At the same time a new three-part agreement was finalized to replace one that had expired. We received an email from a City representative inquiring what lay ahead for the FOFS and Freeman Station. Coincidentally the FOFS Board was also discussing future plans. We noted that the pandemic had decimated our ranks of active volunteers and severely

reduced our ability to grow and succeed. Many discussions ensued between the FOFS and the City leading to this meeting today.

In order for Freeman Station to prosper and continue to serve the surrounding population a sustainable business plan is needed, which includes a combination of full-time paid staff and volunteers. This would allow the station to be open several days a week and develop an exciting educational program. Both of these changes would also bring in more revenue than our once-a-month Open House dates, which operated from Easter to Thanksgiving.

Location, location, location has often been the criteria when selecting a place to succeed. Choosing a home for Freeman Station is no exception. Two criteria have become paramount in choosing a location for other railway museums across North America – these are the proximity to the train station's original location and secondly to be visible and accessible. The FOFS feel that keeping the station in its current location is the best guarantee for a successful future.

On behalf of the Friends of Freeman Station, I ask for your support to carry on the work we have begun. In 2011, it was two members of Council that gave Freeman Station a new lease on life and prevented demolition of a valuable heritage asset. Now, it is possible that today's Council can continue that legacy and preserve Freeman Station for future generations.