

SAVING THE SURVIVORS



Emergency responders are seen on top of Engine 114 as they work to extricate three rail workers from the cab of the engine which turned over when the WP&YR gravel train derailed about three miles north of Bennett, B.C. on Sept. 3. Another worker was found on the ground nearby. A Carcross man died in the accident. See story and more photos below.

Photo courtesy of WP&YR

Carcross man dies in work train derailment

Two Skagway crew members, one Carcross worker injured

By **JEFF BRADY, EMILY PALM and CHUCK TOBIN**
Skagway News / Whitehorse Star

A White Pass & Yukon Route work train derailed early Sunday afternoon near Bennett, B.C., killing a member of the Carcross track maintenance crew and injuring three other rail workers.

Bruce Harder, 45, died in the accident. He was a heavy equipment operator for the railroad and also head of Carcross emergency services, said Gary C. Danielson, president of the railroad.

“Our thoughts and prayers are with Patricia Harder and her family and with Bruce’s family,” Danielson said. “He was an integral part of the Carcross community.”

Also injured were conductor Lee “Toogie” Hartson Jr. and engineer Jeff Ruff, both of Skagway, and heavy equipment operator Neil Plested of Carcross, Danielson said.

Hartson and Plested were air-lifted and Ruff sent via ambulance to Whitehorse General Hospital. The three survivors all had non-life threatening injuries, said Corporal Paul Zechel of the Carcross RCMP.

Danielson said Hartson was later medivaced to Alaska Regional Hospital in Anchorage, where he underwent several hours of surgery.

The accident occurred about 1 p.m. at Mile 36.5 of the railroad along a section of track above Beaver Lake, about three miles south of Bennett, Danielson said.

“We don’t know the cause of the accident at this time and it is under investigation,” he said Monday. “Canadian Transportation Safety Board investigators are on the scene today.”

Passenger train service into Bennett had ended the previous weekend, and the work train was en route from Log Cabin to dump ballast gravel

from a string of eight dumper cars, Danielson said. The train derailed and the engine rolled on its side. The two Carcross operators were in Engine 114 with engineer Ruff, who was taking the gravel train to the site where their equipment was staged to do the work, Danielson said.



A Trans-North Helicopter is loaded with one of the injured. *Photo courtesy of SVFD*

Conductor Hartson was found on the ground about 15 yards from the wrecked train, said Skagway Fire Chief Mark Kirko. About two miles behind the work train was a track motorcar driven by roadmaster Ed Hanousek, who was shuttling John and Janet O'Daniel of Skagway into Bennett to test a satellite dish.

"They came upon it," Danielson said, thanking them for "their quick action which saved at least one life."

Zechel said authorities were notified and emergency responders from Carcross, Whitehorse, Tagish and Skagway converged on the scene. They were shuttled into the area by railroad motorcars from Log Cabin, which became a command center the rest of the afternoon. Helicopters from TEMSCO in Skagway and Trans-North in Whitehorse also responded to transport the injured, and communications assistance was offered by Canada Customs and Skagway Police.

"The cooperation and response was unbelievable," Danielson said.

Fire Chief Kirko echoed Danielson's comments about the smoothness of the work by various responders.

"This was a very large operation that involved 14 different agencies that all worked together flawlessly," Kirko said.

Skagway EMS and Search and Rescue personnel arrived at the scene within an hour of the initial call, said Kirko, adding that EMS Captain Jeremy Simmons co-coordinated with a Carcross nurse for patient care while SAR Captain Wayne Greenstreet called the shots at the scene. For two hours Kirko assumed the initial incident command role at Log Cabin until the Whitehorse Fire Department arrived, he said. At that point Kirko briefed the Whitehorse chief on the situation and deferred command to Canadian jurisdiction while requesting that Skagway personnel continue working.

"The chief agreed and placed his personnel and equipment at the disposal of the onsite coordinators," Kirko said.

Extricating Neil Plested from the engineer's compartment took responders about five hours, said Kirko, who added the quarter to half inch thick steel caused the struggle.

"You've watched these tools tear doors off of cars, but on a train...", said Kirko of devices they used such as the Jaws of Life, sawzall and hydraulic spreading ram.

"This was definitely an eye-opening situation for us," Kirko said, noting that they will look into purchasing equipment suited for train accidents.



From left to right, Sarah Red-Laird, Dylan Hull and Lieutenant Travis Locke of SVFD load up a track car with oxygen and other emergency equipment at Log Cabin. Photo by Stéphanie Dion, courtesy Whitehorse Star

The incident took the life of a fellow emergency worker, one whom Skagway personnel had associated with over the years.

Carcross resident Dorothy Gibbon said Harder was the heart and soul of the Yukon community's emergency services.

The father of six was born and raised in the Carcross area. He headed up the volunteer ambulance service and fire department, the search and rescue team and the Emergency Measures Organization.

"He was active behind all of that," said Gibbon, herself a longtime member of emergency services in Carcross.

"He stepped up to the plate to take on the responsibility and recruited new volunteers as much as he could.

"He did lots of footwork in trying to get training in all skills for people out here," Gibbon said.

She said Harder was also very instrumental in getting extra emergency response equipment for the Carcross area, and had been with the emergency services sector for well over a decade.

"There was never a harsh word that came out of Bruce," said Gibbon, remarking that he brought a level-head to his role in emergency response.

"It did not matter what was happening, he was always positive."

She said the community is still grieving over Harder's death. "It is really tough. He was a nice guy."

Dale Harder, Bruce's younger brother, said Bruce loved fishing but he also loved to teach people about safety and avalanche awareness.

"The best way to describe him, I think, is as a big brother to everybody.

"He always just wanted to help people out of trouble," Dale said.

The Harder family was raised on the family-owned Ten Mile Ranch along the Tagish Road, by father Dave Harder and mother Carolee Elliot.

Dale said his brother had four children, two stepchildren and one grandchild.

"He was very soft spoken with a big heart," said Dale. "In my 40 years around him, I do not know if I ever heard him raise his voice."

He said Bruce's number one concern in the last couple of years was his desire to strengthen the emergency response capability and preparedness for the South Klondike Highway. In the case of his brother's death, he said, there was not much anyone could have done.

Generally, though, his brother Bruce emphasized the importance of solid emergency response services because of the high level of tourist traffic, tour buses and the extensive use of the mountainous wilderness by all walks of outdoor enthusiasts.

Eyewitness accounts from the parking lot at Log Cabin suggested the response was swift.

The first of the emergency response vehicles to arrive was the ambulance team from Carcross, followed by emergency response personnel from Skagway, and two helicopters that were eventually joined by a third chopper from the Yukon.

The response, said the eyewitness, was coordinated and professional.

For some responding from Carcross, it was only their arrival at the scene that confirmed the death of their colleague and mentor.

"It was professional to say the least," the eyewitness recalled. "Although they knew it was not good, it did not show."

Harder had worked for White Pass for four years. A memorial service is being planned for this Saturday in Carcross.

Pupil enrollment down to near the breaking point

By JEFF BRADY

Skagway City School opened Aug. 17 with an enrollment of 105 students and had lost one by the school board meeting on Aug. 29. That's getting precariously close to going below 101, which would trigger a loss of \$133,000 in state funds.

"We didn't anticipate this happening this soon," said Superintendent Michael Dickens. "It's a big problem."

Some high school girls unexpectedly transferred out of the district, he said, prompting the current concern. There also are a number of home school children that are not enrolled and fewer exchange students this year, he said.

More losses are expected with the seasonal shift in Skagway's population, but even with the two-week count period starting early on Sept. 11, the number could drop below 101, Dickens warned.

Skagway has been helped by the earlier count period, which has been approved annually in recent years by the Commissioner of Education.

Without this waiver, Skagway would have seven or eight students less than if it counted in October like the rest of the state. But the district had budgeted for 105 students, and it's already at 104.

“The hit is immediate,” Dickens said, if the number reaches the breaking point, and he is urging anyone interested in taking in an exchange student to call the district. There are some German boys ready to be placed, he said. Thus far, just one female exchange student is enrolled, compared with four last year.

“Does the community realize how close we are,” interjected board member Joanne Korsmo, “how dangerous the water is?”

Dickens said after next year the situation could be worse, as a drop is expected after the large Class of 2008 graduates. Federal grants that have funded a couple of teaching positions also are ending but he is actively trying to secure more grants.

The city has approximately \$700,000 in U.S. Forest Service money reserved for the school that the city is holding for an emergency situation, Dickens said, but the district may be entitled to it should the need arise.

Dickens and board members said this year’s community forum should focus on finances and programs: what to keep and what not to keep.

On a grander scale, Dickens said he worries that with the lack of winter work for many parents, the enrollment drop could be a “precursor of a dying community.”

State, Skagway react to voter passage of cruise initiative

By EMILY A. PALM

The passage of the cruise ship initiative on Aug. 22 has some people wondering, what’s next? Particularly those in the offices that will enforce the new regulations and collect the taxes.

Before the ball starts rolling on implementing changes, the Lieutenant Governor’s office must certify the initiative and 90-days afterwards it becomes law. The target effective date is Dec. 15, Mark Morones, Special Assistant for Communications for the Attorney General’s Office for Alaska, wrote in a recent e-mail.

Alaska’s Department of Revenue is preparing to collect the head and gambling taxes included in the ballot. “We haven’t ever taxed [the cruise industry] before, we know nothing about them,” said Larry Meyers, Deputy Director of Tax Division under ADR.

Currently they are meeting with communities and industry representatives to find out how they keep track of their passenger numbers, which cruise lines stop at which ports, and other preliminary data, Meyers and Johanna Bales, Revenue Audit Supervisor of the Excise Tax Group, in a recent phone interview.

Ports of call that do not impose city head taxes on passengers can elect to receive a portion of the shared fund, a suggested \$5 per visitor from the ballot’s sponsors.

Is Skagway eligible to partake in the pool considering ships pay a private passenger fee to use the White Pass docks? Good question, said Bales and Meyers, adding that they will be slogging through such details in the next month.

Their office absorbed the clerical duties of implementing two major tax type changes from the recent election, said Meyers. “We have a really full plate at this time,” added Bales.

This Tuesday, the Department of Environmental Conservation will be meeting to discuss the new environmental regulations. “Mainly we’re going to be preparing for and working for what the people voted to do,” said Lynda Giguere, a public information officer for the DEC.

When sponsors of the initiative drafted the ballot measure, Giguere said the department prepared a statement of costs for them to develop new permit programs and have engineers on board large cruise ships. The costs amounted to \$5.6 million a year, she said.

Passing the initiative raised the bar for how the cruise industry is expected to behave in Alaska, said Gershon Cohen, the ballot’s co-drafter and environmental advocate in Haines. “I’m hoping it energized people to become more involved politically in their areas,” he said, adding that despite being incredibly outspent in the ad campaign, votes were not for sale.

“Skagway is probably going to be the big winner,” Cohen said, estimating the windy town will receive \$4.5 million.

Not all expressed such sunny sentiment towards the measures’ passage. After all, Skagway voted two-to-one against the measure.

“This town would have dried up and blown away without tourism,” said tour operator Steve Hites, who believes there will be ramifications we can’t even imagine.

“The industry has cleaned up their act,” said Hites on the environmental changes, noting they are better in Alaska than anywhere in the world.

“The people who voted yes don’t like to wait in lines at the post office and bank, or to walk across the street. They feel inconvenienced by the industry,” said Hites, adding they would not have a renovated city hall, new school or even be thinking about building a new clinic without tourism.

Though the initiative lost in Skagway, 101 silent Skagway supporters marked the “yes” box, and only time will tell how they will be heard.



Shoppers crowd Broadway on one of the summer's few sunny days. By next summer each person arriving via cruise ship could bring in \$5 for tourism-related projects around the state. *Jeff Brady*

Tourism '06: Good or bad?

Depends on whom you talk to

By EMILY A. PALM

Signs sprang up weeks ago— fireweed blossoms climbed their way to the top, Buckwheat's back in town, and school is in session.

These rainy months posing as summer have ended with Jack Frost waiting around the corner to sprinkle his baggie of termination dust. Some has already spilled on the mountain tops.

So how did the tourism season fare for this bustling cruise port? Answers and theories abounded.

Since numbers do not fudge the truth, the quest to quell the curious mind began there. In May, June and July, 2,500 less people walked into the Arctic Brotherhood visitor's center than last year, according to the Skagway Convention and Visitors Bureau daily visitor count stats.

Arrivals into Skagway via the Klondike and Alaska Marine Highways through July were down about 12 percent, noted Kristin Wilkinson, acting CVB director, in her recent tourism report to the Skagway City Council.

"We are not hearing too much negative feedback from local businesses as to how the season is faring for them," she reported, "but I imagine there has to be some impact."

Ground control to Sergeant Preston: the independent lodge ran strong this year, said owner Chris Valentine.

Valentine's report of solid booking reflects the bed tax revenue for the 2006 fiscal year, which increased five percent from last year, Wilkinson said at the last CVB meeting.

Since people generally plan trips far in advance, Valentine theorized that an increase in gas prices now would more likely affect travel next summer.

Perhaps, though, it was all the good vibes. "I'm very, very proud of my crew," beamed Valentine, who called his staff "the cat's meow." The feeling seemed to be mutual. "Best boss in the world!" said Nikki Cochran, an employee at the lodge, while folding linens.

With trends pointing toward more advanced tour bookings, Sockeye Cycle Company Operations Manager Yoni Morse said the numbers have stayed roughly the same despite chillier temperatures this damp summer. Shore excursion representatives have had to work a bit harder to amp up tourists to ride in the rain, he admitted.

Overall though, the conditions seem to bring out more adventurous folk, Morse said, adding, "We're having fun... the guides have been awesome."

While the weather may have an effect on people's moods, it doesn't seem to change the numbers, said Stacy Eaton, tour manager at the Klondike Gold Dredge, where she said things stayed steady this summer.

The Days of '98 show was down a little bit from last year, said Operations Manager Ken Malone, attributing the dip to weather. "We're plugging along," he said, adding that reception of the show has been as enthusiastic as ever.

Pedicab drivers reported less than enthusiastic receptions from tourists to get toted about town on drizzly days in open air carts. The North Country Pedicab had roughly 50 percent more business last year, said Travis Jemmett, independent manager for the Skagway drivers.

Warm passenger cars must have seemed more inviting. The White Pass and Yukon Route railroad saw a couple record-breaking ridership days this season. "So far this summer we've hauled 6,000 or better every Wednesday," said John Mielke, VP of rail operations.

Skagway Air Service had more half-days of service this year due to weather, but it hasn't been substantial, said Jaymyn Cook, office personnel for the company. "All in all, I think business is good," she said, adding that a bright point to the dark clouds meant less forest fires.

Cloudy days more sharply affected Timber Exploration Mining Survey Cargo Operations, who have been breaking records on the other end of the spectrum as WP&YR.

"It's been an incredibly challenging summer to say the least," said Craig Jennison, TEMSCO Tour Manager.

While sales are great, in 20 years of flying TEMSCO has never had to cancel so many flights, he said, adding that retail shops and the train do well on rainy days.

Poncho-clad cruisers seemed to spend much time in The Heart of Broadway as owner Cara Cosgrove reported more flow in her store this year. The independent store stocks its shelves with local artists' work.

Off Broadway store Now and Then saw considerably less flow this summer. Owner Blaine Mero will close shop for good next month. "It's been a really bad summer," he said, musing that fuel and weather could play their roles, but mostly it's the overwhelming amount of jewelry stores. "People don't come to Alaska to buy tanzanite," he said, adding that he doesn't hold anything against jewelry store employees, but... "People comment every day, 'why are there so many damn jewelry stores?'"

While it would be nice if tourists had unlimited resources, they don't, said Mero, adding that he thinks more people are going on excursions since "experiencing Alaska is more important than a tanzanite bracelet."

Alaska Mountain Guides have seen a 7 percent drop this summer, said Sean Winters, Skagway AMG operations manager.

The market is dynamic and cannot be explained solely by weather or any other single factor, oftentimes it has more to do with whether the ships at port hit Skagway first on their northbound journey – with fresh money to spend on adventure tours – or if they are heading south after seeing Kenai and Denali, said Winters.

"There's been a consistent drop across the board," he said, noting that he's spoken with many other tour operators. "It's tourism, it's going to fluctuate," he added.

Regardless of what business owners revealed to this intrepid reporter about how they fared this summer, the truth will come out after the third quarter sales tax figures are compiled by the city.

Road Relay madness tonight

At 6 p.m. tonight Skagway time, the first group of 139 teams will depart for the 24th running of the Klondike Trail of '98 International Road Relay.

The place to be is Broadway and Second for the start of each leg, every half hour until the last group leaves at 11 p.m.

Skagway will be represented by five teams with their starting times: Alaska Marine Lines, 6 p.m.; Team SNAFU and the Dead Salmon Heads, 6:30 p.m.; Radracers, 7 p.m.; WP&YR Highballers X, 7:30 p.m.

There are reports also that the Haines Slackmasters have been infiltrated by Skagwegians this year. They start at 6:30 p.m.

Look in the next issue for Emily Palm's report – she's running leg 9 for the DSHers – times and photos of the race.

PHOTO OF THE WEEK



LORDS OF SKAGTOWN

Josh Cotton rides the rail atop one of the elements at the new skatepark next to the Skagway Recreation Center. See a report about the SRC in sports.

• [HISTORY FEATURE: Guthrie descendants visit home of great uncle and aunt](#)

• [SPORTS & REC: Rec. Center thrives; Four runners in X-C hunt; Box of Rocks times](#)

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