

**\$1.5-MILLION PROJECT****Zoo trains are being refurbished to carry visitors**

BY GINA DAMRON • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • APRIL 11, 2008

As the Detroit Zoo trains shuttle people down the track this summer, the conductors will be driving in style.

The engines are rebuilt. The formerly dull crimson, deep yellow and black paint stripes along the steel bodies are now shiny enough to see one's reflection. Broken gauges were replaced.

And, for the first time, the tender cars, where the conductors sit, have air-conditioning.

Two engines and two tender cars are nearly completed, and a third engine and tender will soon be rehabbed.

"We made everything work," said Bill Beaudin, owner of Photographic Support Inc. in Sterling Heights, which restored the trains. He last rode the train when he was a kid.

When routine maintenance was no longer effective on the more than 50-year-old engines, the zoo decided to move ahead with the \$1.5-million project, which includes replacing some of the track, said Greg Harris, chief advancement officer for the zoo.

The project is being paid partly with a large donation, he said; the zoo will raise funds for the rest.

The trains should be running again in early May, but they would have been helpful to Kelly Chadwick on Thursday, as she supervised first-graders from Northwood Elementary in Royal Oak for a scavenger hunt.

"It would have been nice if the train could have brought us to the back," said Chadwick of Royal Oak as her 7-year-old daughter Sara snapped a picture of giraffes in the African exhibit. Sara could have used a train ride, too.

"I need a break," she said.

The zoo's first train left the station in 1931. After it was retired, Chrysler Corp. donated the new trains, which started up in the late 1940s and have been running ever since. Chrysler refurbished the trains more than 10 years ago, but not to the extent of what Beaudin's company has done, Harris said.

The 2 1/2-mile round-trip takes visitors past bison, elk and horses at a brisk 12 m.p.h. About 250,000 of the zoo's more than 1 million visitors ride the train each year, Harris said.

Nancy Maxwell rides in the train's passenger cars with her grandkids now, but she remembers taking her daughter on the train years ago. The Beverly Hills resident said the train gives people a chance to get lost in the excitement of the zoo.

"You're so close to everything," Maxwell said, as her grandkids -- 5-year-old Noah and 2-year-old Lauren -- peered through a wooden fence at a peacock. "You're enclosed in the zoo ... and you're on this train. The outside world is on the other side."

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AMY LEANG/DFP

Senior technician Jim Hall, 53, of Roseville, right, installs a body side panel on a train at Photographic Support Inc. in Sterling Heights on Thursday. With him is PSI owner Bill Beaudin, 44, of Addison Township.



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The rebuilding of gears, engines and other mechanical devices began Feb. 1.