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Friday, May 16, 2003

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End of line for Grand Avenue railroad display

Railroad buffs who lose rental space build up steam to move mountains



GIANT TASK AHEAD: Bellingham Society of Model Engineers Treasurer David Cohn stands in the HO model train layout in the basement of the 111 Grand Ave. building in Bellingham Tuesday. Cohn just learned that the building was sold and that the model train layout, which Cohn says is the largest in the state, must be dismantled and moved. The BSME layout has 2,000 feet of track and took 11 years to build. *PHILIP A. DWYER HERALD PHOTOS*

PEOPLE: Massive model train layout that took 11 years to build needs a new home.

Dean Kahn, The Bellingham Herald

Barring a miracle, David Cohn and his railroad buddies will soon have to start moving mountains - and lakes, trestles and buildings - to find a new home for the massive model railroad layout in the basement of the downtown building at 111 Grand Ave.

Members of the Bellingham Society of

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Model Engineers have put the layout together over the past 11 years. But sale of the building is pending, and it's likely they'll have to find storage space or a new home for the massive miniature landscape.

Several thousand people view the layout each year during periodic open houses.

The railroad landscape - made of plaster atop a base of cardboard and plywood - was built to fit the 3,000-square-foot basement space, columns and all. Taking it apart will likely result in unavoidable damage, said Cohn, treasurer of the train club.

He hopes the building's new owner will at least let the layout remain in place until next summer, after people who attend a national model railroad convention in Seattle have had a chance to visit it. If nothing works out, the club will have to move out by the end of June or so, when the real estate transaction closes.

"The idea of trying to rebuild it in a year is pretty daunting," Cohn said.

Month-to-month

The owners of the Grand Avenue building, John Blethen and James Wilson, have a pending agreement to sell it to a Los Angeles artist who wants to open a gallery and use the basement for his work studio.

Cohn said Blethen and Wilson have been good landlords. The club has paid low rent for the basement on a month-to-month basis. But without a lease, the new owner isn't obligated to let the railroad club stay put.

Rodger Spero, the real estate agent working with the Los Angeles artist, said the buyer likely will need the full basement to work on his own sculptures.

Work on the railroad layout began 11 years ago when Gold Hill Station, a hobby store that specialized in model railroads, occupied the street-level space in the building. When the store closed, Mindport Exhibits moved in, but Mindport recently relocated to Holly Street.

The railroad layout is the one the largest on the West Coast, says the club, with 2,000 linear feet of track - more than 10 scale miles. The club owns the layout, but members own most of the locomotives and other rolling stock, which number in the thousands. The trains, rigged to emit whistles, clatters and engine rumbles, wind their way through a model universe of towns, depots, bridges and



ALL ABOARD: A HO-scale model train chugs along the Bellingham Society of Model Engineers layout at 111 Grand Ave.



For more information

- **The next open house** at the model railroad layout at 111 Grand Ave. will be noon to 5 p.m. June 1. Admission by donation. Enter via the alley.
- **For details** about Bellingham Society of Model Engineers and its model railroad, call David Cohn at 733-0711. The club's Web site is <http://www.bsme.org/>
- **A 62-linear-foot layout** of G-scale model trains will be on display at an open house from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. June 21 at American Museum of Radio, 1312 Bay St. Free admission; donations requested.

mountains.

"In many cases, the scenery extends from almost the ceiling to the floor," Cohn said.

Spero, like Wilson, is trying to help the railroad club find a new home, preferably downtown. Spero said a move to someplace other than a basement with an alley entrance could turn out to be a good move.

"We'd like to help them find a place," Wilson agreed. "They're a great entity for the downtown."

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