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Sunday, June 1, 2003

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Time's up for model trains



STOP, LOOK AND LISTEN: Gladys Libolt holds her son, Benjamin, so he can get a better view of model trains at the Bellingham Society of Model Engineers open house while Jack Bostwick, general manager of the club (in vest), shows others how things work. *MAME BURNS HERALD PHOTO*

Mark Porter, The Bellingham Herald

Benjamin Libolt couldn't get enough of the huge railroad display created by the Bellingham Society of Model Engineers in the basement of 111 Grand Ave.

The blond train buff from Lynden, who was wearing socks showing the popular cartoon character Thomas the Tank Engine, was one of hundreds of people expected to visit the display during the nonprofit group's open house that ends today. "Choo! Choo!" the 2-year-old exclaimed, dashing to and from the train layout with his mother, Gladys Libolt, in tow. "All aboard!"

They'd already been inside the 3,000 square-foot-space, with its 2,000 linear feet of track, for an hour, and Benjamin still didn't want to leave.

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"I ask him if he's ready to go, and he says, 'no,'" his mom said. "Now that we've seen it once, every time we get in the car he'll always want to see the trains."

But Benjamin will have to wait awhile before seeing such a display again in Whatcom County. The building at 111 Grand Avenue has been sold, so the club must vacate its rented basement by June 30, said treasurer David Cohn.

Members have been installing track there for 11 years. Now, they must dismantle whatever is salvageable from the miniature landscapes, starting Tuesday, and keep looking for a 6,000- to 7,000-square-foot place to relocate, within downtown, they hope.

"We can't move it," said Cohn, looking at the maze of track, trains, trestles and displays. "All of it was designed to fit in this space."

Members hoped to be able to stay in the basement at least through next summer, so people who attend the National Model Railroad Association's convention in Seattle then would have a chance to visit.

Instead, the club, which has 36 active members, will have to remove the miniature trees, shrubs, some landscaping as well as thousands of dollars worth of electronics, Cohn said. The tracks will go in the Dumpster, and many of the landscapes will be cut up and removed, or scrapped.

The club owns the layout, while its 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 mountains, with everything from one-of-a-kind trestles to a scale-model cafe with a television flickering in the background.

The layout is the one the largest in the region, said Jack Hamilton, vice-chairman of the planning committee for the Seattle convention. He came up to see the display for the first time Saturday.

Hamilton raved about the bend trestle that took club members months to construct, calling it an example of the unique nature of model railroading. He's disappointed the layout won't be on conventioners' itinerary next year.

"This would have been a great stop for people traveling to the convention, from the convention and during the convention," said Hamilton, a Silverdale resident. "It's going to leave a big hole on the north end (of the state)."

A much smaller layout of G-scale model trains is currently on display at the American Museum of Radio, 1312 Bay St. Cohn hopes the model railroaders eventually find a new space where enthusiasts can consolidate and display their trains.

● **The final open house** at the model railroad layout at 111 Grand Ave. will be from noon to 5 p. m. today. Admission is by donation; enter via the alley.

● **For details** about Bellingham Society of Model Engineers, call David Cohn, 733-0711. The club's Web site is <http://www.bsme.org/>

● **For information** about the National Model Railroad Association's convention in Seattle next year, see <http://www.nmra.org> 2004.org

"We're an asset to the community," he said.

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