

McCloud Dinner Train to scale back service in 2009

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By Tony D'Souza

McCloud, Calif. - At the McCloud Community Services District board meeting Monday evening, board president Tim Dickinson began discussion of last Wednesday's "public meeting" held by Nestle and facilitated by Nestle contractor Kearns&West by saying, "I told Kearns&West to do a lot of advertising. There was none except an [announcement] in the newspaper [the day of the meeting] and I got a letter the same day. [Kearns&West moderator] Bill Pistor was not prepared for the turnout, there were not enough materials. His public speaking was less than satisfactory."

Dickinson went on to describe what transpired at the meeting as a "free for all," and said that the event undermined Nestle's credibility going forward. "To me, it was a very disappointing meeting... But I really felt like the people of McCloud did a good job making cogent statements."

As the board members and members of the community added their comments on the meeting, the sense of disappointment was palpable in Scout Hall.

"I wish that Nestle and Kearns&West would back off," Debra Anderson said, and others asked that McCloud be given a chance to discuss the situation without outside entities such as Nestle and other non-district bodies present.

Nestle's project manager Dave Palais said about the meeting, "Our hope was that Wednesday would be a start. Kearns&West came highly recommended. We interviewed them extensively. We were very disappointed in the presentation and outcome... [Even with the poor acoustics] the presentation was not professional." Discussion turned to the behavior at the meeting of members of the audience, with Kelly Claro commenting, "While [Bill Pistor] was monotonous, there's a way of addressing other people. Yes, he was horrible. But when you attack a person, it reflects poorly on McCloud."

Claro's sentiment was taken further later in the meeting when outgoing board member Cathy Young said, "I don't feel the public can [hold meetings without an outside moderator] because when one person stands up to say something, 15 others stand up and cut us down. For this town to have a public meeting, it cannot happen without a facilitator because of the rudeness of the people of this town."

Railway scaling back

The most noteworthy item of the evening was the announcement by Jeff Forbis, owner of the McCloud Railway, that the Shasta Sunset Dinner Train will be scaling back service in 2009. The Dinner Train will cease service completely from

January until Easter, and most scheduled Thursday service will cease operations after that.

“If I can no longer hope that Nestle would come in [to increase rail traffic],” Forbis explained, “the Dinner Train is a losing proposition.”

Forbis then went on to describe his negotiations with Nestle over the years about the train servicing the proposed bottling plant as being “coolly received” by the water bottling company. Though admitting that an outside assessment of his company’s ability to ship Nestle’s bottled water from McCloud came up with economic figures which “weren’t what I had hoped for,” he described to the board a history of failed negotiations with Nestle which included Nestle cancelling meetings with him at the last minute.

Nestle’s Dave Palais responded by saying, “What Jeff said is correct. We did have missteps in getting Jeff to talk with our logistics people. We did have a couple meetings scheduled that got cancelled. It frustrated Jeff and it frustrated me. But you can’t just come to a company without a detailed concept. I told Jeff that early on... [Nestle] has had bad experiences with rail... problems with rail delivery schedules.”

Board member Al Schoenstein told Palais, “It appears that a serious effort wasn’t made to talk to Jeff... You probably could have worked with him more seriously, it would have been a ‘good neighbor’ policy to work with Jeff... He did go to meetings where nobody was there to meet him.”

One audience member told Forbis, “You’ve gone out of your way with Nestle, they’ve been dangling a carrot before us to get a contract. It’s a game.”

And board member Kurt Kleinhaus, who works for the railway, added, “This town owes a lot to the train.”

After the meeting, Forbis said that he will be meeting with business owners in McCloud to discuss ways to bring tour groups into the town to ride the Dinner Train on at least some of the Thursdays that will see service reduced in 2009.