

UNION PACIFIC HOPES TO BUILD MAJOR NEW LOCAL YARD

By Hearne Mayor Ruben Gomez

Union Pacific (UP) is talking with local landowners and officials about its hope to build one of the biggest railroad classification yards in Texas between Hearne and Mumford. This proposed new \$200 million yard could easily create over 200 new local jobs. Starting pay would be around \$40,000 a year with great benefits. Railroad employees with seniority get paid more.

UP wants to build its new yard outside of Hearne because this spot is in a key location on UP's route map. As the hub of UP's central Texas activities, Hearne is already one of the busiest small town rail centers in the country. Seven different UP subdivisions operate out of Hearne and nearby Valley Junction. These include UP's Austin, Bryan, Ennis, Ft. Worth, Giddings, Hearne, and Navasota subs which extend as far as Ft. Worth, Longview, Houston, Smithville, and San Antonio.

At present, Hearne is primarily an "away from home" terminal where UP employees from elsewhere bring trains to town. With a new southwestern Robertson County yard, Hearne would also become a "home" terminal where some Hearne-based railroaders would work in the local yard as well as take assembled trains to the far reaches of the above subdivisions.

Several hundred high-paying permanent new jobs would be a major long-term economic boost for the region. Upwards of a thousand temporary workers would be needed for a year or more to ready the site and lay the tracks. Local people would land some temporary jobs; hotel rooms would be booked; rental housing and RV parking spaces would be needed; local places to eat and other local businesses would see increased traffic; local contractors would be kept busy. In addition to UP's expansion, new railroad-related businesses would open nearby and provide other new jobs.

At the same time this local economic development would be conferring significant benefits on Hearne, it would be providing Mumford ISD with a major boost. While agricultural, oil, and gas activities have traditionally supported Mumford ISD's tax base, this UP project would significantly expand Mumford ISD's tax base by placing a major facility in its midst. Some Mumford retail development might also be expected.

UP's planned project affects around twenty different properties and landowners. If the project goes forward, UP would purchase the land. The company is not interested in acquiring mineral or water rights. Some property owners might be willing to sell. Others aren't too keen on the notion since UP wants to buy some 1,100 acres of fertile Brazos bottom farmlands that are rich in local and family history and have lots of sentimental value.

This planned new UP classification yard would be built on the west side of the two sets of north/south railroad tracks that come through Mumford. It would stretch some five miles from just north of the new baseball complex to Muse Road. Contrary to rumors, FM50 would not be re-routed or turned into a four-lane interstate. In fact, since the new yard would be on the Brazos River side of the tracks, it would not be visible from many areas of FM50.

In addition to creating hundreds of jobs, UP's newfound local interest fits in nicely with a major Hearne goal. The city has been talking with Blinn and Texas State Technical College about bringing regional trade and technical education opportunities to the old Hearne High School. This hoped-for job training

facility would equip students and the local workforce with needed skills. UP's new yard might help turn this dream into more of a reality.

Since the City of Hearne is hoping to build a civic center, the idea of incorporating space for a new UP training facility has even been discussed. With seven different subdivisions coming into town, the city is pushing the idea of placing a regional UP training facility for new hires and existing workers on the five and a half acres next to the historic depot.

UP's proposed southwestern Robertson County yard acknowledges Hearne's "Crossroads of Texas" status and is in keeping with local railroading roots. Indeed, railroad and agricultural activities have been the backbone of Hearne's economy for the past 140 plus years. Area railroads were built to take local agricultural goods to market.

While the restored depot reminds everyone of Hearne's railroading past, a major new classification yard would continue this railroading tradition and serve our area well into the future.