

# National Historic Landmark designation would be great for trolleys — and Yakima

**T**hey're not as iconic as the cable cars that grace the streets of San Francisco. They're not as famous as Trolley of "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" fame, which for years transported viewers back and forth between host Fred Rogers' TV house and the Neighborhood of Make-Believe.

But they're pretty cool anyway. And they're ours. And with good fortune, they might eventually gain National Historic Landmark status — the highest level of historic recognition in America.

They're Yakima Valley Trolleys, the last historically intact interurban railroad in America — boasting early 20th century interurban electric railroad cars.

Unfortunately, they haven't left the barn for a while thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, and there's no guarantee they will be resuming their normal 5-mile

journey from downtown Yakima to Selah on spring and summer weekends this year. There's hope, though, that rides can resume once Yakima County reaches Phase 3 of the current statewide reopening plan.

There's hope as well in that state historic preservation officials have offered support for the Yakima Valley Trolleys system to receive designation as a National Historic Landmark by the National Park Service.

Yakima's trolley system, which dates to 1907, is already on the National Register of Historic Places, which indicates significance locally and possibly at a national level. Elevation to National Historic Landmark status would be a clear indication of significance for the entire nation.

The state Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation believes the trolley operation "as a whole is eligible for listing at the national level of significance, and that it is more than worthy of National Historic Landmark designation," wrote Michael Houser, state architectural historian, in a letter of support for a Save America's Treasures grant.

To be eligible for such a grant, which is administered by the Park Service, entities must be either a National Historic Landmark or be listed on the National Register of Historic Places for national significance. Yakima Valley Trolleys plans to apply for a grant and for National Historic Landmark status.

"I thoroughly believe this is of national significance, not just regional or statewide," said Ken Johnsen, president of the trolley nonprofit, in a recent

Herald-Republic story. "There's nothing else like it in the country."

There are just a handful of railroads that carry National Historic Landmark designation, and only 25 National Historic Landmark sites in Washington, just two of which are east of the Cascades. Houser has indicated that he believes Yakima Valley Trolleys is qualified, Johnsen said.

Such a designation could significantly help the trolley line secure more grants and funding. "We live on a very small budget," Johnsen said.

In addition, it could boost the trolley line's public image and be a boon for tourism in the Yakima area.

And it's much, much cooler (in more ways than one) than the nearest National Historic Landmark in Eastern Washington — Hanford's B Reactor.

Johnsen has noted that he has no idea how long it will take before any decisions are made. It's already a long process, and the pandemic might make it longer. But we wish him and his group a smooth journey with no derailments.

A National Historic Landmark in Yakima? Now, that would be cool.

• *Members of the Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board are Greg Halling, Joanna Markell and Bruce Drysdale.*