

Enthusiasts hope model train exhibit in Norfolk will help get hobby back on track

By Arleen Spenceley
December 12, 2017



Courtesy photo

The Tidewater Division of the Atlantic Coast S Gaugers has a model train exhibit in Norfolk for the holiday season.



Courtesy photo

The model train exhibit is in the SunTrust building in downtown Norfolk and runs through Dec. 23.

When Tony Valasek was a kid, collecting model trains was a popular pastime. The hobby has lost traction since, but “it still exists,” he said.

And as a member of the Tidewater Division of the Atlantic Coast S Gaugers, he wants to promote it. So the group created a model train exhibit in downtown Norfolk. S gauge trains are 1:64 scale, between O and HO gauges.

Valasek, 63, has collected trains since childhood.

“I was born in September,” he said. “My dad bought the first train in December.”

His father assembled the track and maintained the train until Valasek was old enough to help.

He remembers his father “would come home from work and have a blue and yellow box in his arms. I knew at a very early age that it was another train.”

It made him feel “like a kid on Christmas,” he said. “It didn’t get any better than

that.”

His dad taught him how to work on the track and wire it.

“It was good, quality family time,” Valasek said. “When he got too old to do it, he turned it over to me.”

He still owns the first train his father got him, plus about 500 more pieces.

The hobby is about more than just running trains, he said.

“It’s a real good way to learn about electrical wiring, a real good way of using products to make mountain ranges and city streets. Before you do anything, you have to sit down and draw up a layout pattern (for the track).”

But that might also be why children aren’t as interested in it, he said.

“The biggest problem now is that kids want instant gratification,” Valasek said. “It takes a long time, and you’re never finished with a layout. I’ve got a layout at my house that I’ve been working on for the last 15 years and it’s not done yet – and it’ll probably never be done.”

He thinks exhibits like the one downtown can prove the work is worthwhile.

The exhibit features two layouts – one 26-by-18 feet and the other 10-by-10.

On the larger track, there are five trains running at a time. On the smaller one, which has a Thomas the Tank Engine theme, there are four.

By pushing buttons, “you can make signals flash, you can make workmen come out of their house, there are towers that turn, people that walk up and down a platform carrying baggage,” Valasek said.

The group has had an annual holiday season display downtown for about a decade, he said.

Ken McNelly, the chapter’s president, wants the tradition to rekindle interest in the hobby.

“It’s family fun from one year old to 90,” said McNelly, 78.

He got his first train in 1947. He still has it.

“And the engine still runs,” he said.

The exhibit, which is free, runs through Dec. 23.

“We hope everybody will come by and establish an appreciation (for model trains),” Valasek said. “Prepare to be mystified.”

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