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News Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Alaska Railroad celebrates 100 years of service with centennial event in Nenana



An Alaska Railroad charter train is positioned near the Nenana Alaska Railroad Depot for the centennial celebration on July 15, 2023. Photo courtesy of Alaska Railroad Corporation.

NENANA, Alaska— With a large crowd of more than 800 in attendance, the Alaska Railroad commemorated the 100th anniversary of its 1923 golden spike moment in Nenana, Alaska, on Saturday, July 15, 2023. Esteemed guests, including state officials, Alaska Railroad Corporation leadership, board, and representatives from Washington D.C., joined the celebration showcasing a century of progress, impact and dedication to the community and to Alaska.

Over the past 100 years, the Alaska Railroad has been a lifeline, connecting communities, fostering economic growth and facilitating the movement of resources and people across the state. Alaska Railroad Corporation Board Chair John Shively was the master of ceremonies for the celebration. He introduced each influential leader as they reflected upon the Alaska Railroad's rich legacy and its unwavering commitment to the state of Alaska.

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*From left: ARRC President & CEO Bill O'Leary, FRA Administrator Amit Bose, Nenana Native Association First Chief Caroline Ketzler, Sen. Dan Sullivan, Gov. Mike Dunleavy, ARRC Board Chair John Shively.
Photo courtesy of Alaska Railroad Corporation.*

Gov. Mike Dunleavy acknowledged the railroad's significant influence on the state, saying, "Alaska is, in many respects, about a railroad. Anchorage would not have existed without the railroad. Like Alaska, in and of itself, the railroad was all about promise, hope and opportunity. What is our state motto? North to the Future. The railroad is a part of that."

Nenana Native Association First Chief Caroline Ketzler reflected on the past as she commented on her family's connection to the golden spike moment from 1923.

"There was once a young girl, who watched from the crowd as President Warren G. Harding drove that final golden spike into the ground," Chief Ketzler said. "That was 100 years ago to the day that my great grandmother Margaret John, at 8 years of age, watched as Nenana became the gateway to the Interior. It is an honor to relive that experience today and bear witness to what my grandmother did many years ago."

ARRC President and CEO Bill O'Leary highlighted the underlying purpose of the railroad: "What the railroad really stands for is service to Alaska and Alaskans. This organization is absolutely key to the state of Alaska, and I know all 700-plus employees of the Alaska Railroad are dedicated to its mission and our state."

U.S. Sen. Dan Sullivan expressed his admiration for the railroad and the beauty of traveling by train.

"There is something when you experience a train ride that is just different, takes you back in time. It's a slower time, it's a time that allows you to enjoy things, to see things. That's something that's really special about this railroad. President Harding saw this too. He described

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Alaska to a reporter in Seattle, quote, 'Words seem inadequate to portray the grandeur, to measure the magnificence, to express the mightiness, or acclaim the glory of Alaska.'

Traveling from Washington, D.C., Federal Railroad Administration Administrator Amit Bose made his first visit to Alaska and emphasized the importance of continued collaboration and the unprecedented rail investment in President Biden's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which is making billions available over five years to build the 21st century rail network that serves the needs of all Americans.

"We need to keep working together, keep investing, not just over five years, but for the long-haul," said Administrator Bose. "That's how we keep spurring domestic manufacturing, job creation and economic growth. That's how we ensure – in 20, 50, or another 100 years – rail continues to benefit places like Alaska and Americans in every region of our country."

The celebration began with the opening of a time capsule buried in 1998 during the railroad's 75th anniversary. The contents of the capsule, including photographs, letters, a gold spike and state citation, among other items, are now in the care of the city of Nenana for future display. A block party offered local barbeque alongside music and activities. ARRC President O'Leary cut the ribbon for a new gazebo, which was donated to the Nenana community by the Alaska Railroad and will provide a vibrant gathering space for generations to come.

"Nenana is a small town where big things happen," exclaimed Nenana Mayor Josh Verhagen, emphasizing the spirit of progress and possibility that permeates the town.

To top off the day, Gov. Dunleavy, Sen. Sullivan and FRA Administrator Bose took swings at golden spikes — just like President Warren Harding did back in 1923.

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*Alaska Gov. Mike Dunleavy drives in the golden spike in Nenana, Alaska, July 15, 2023.
Photo courtesy of Alaska Railroad Corporation.*

Expressing his gratitude to those who made the event possible, O’Leary said, “I think Alaska is a state with almost limitless potential,” echoing a sense of hope for the bright future that lies ahead.

Festivities around the Alaska Railroad’s centennial celebration also included an open house at the Anchorage Alaska Railroad Depot in May. A similar event is planned for Sept. 23, 2023, at the Fairbanks Railroad Depot.

Learn more about the Alaska Railroad’s 100th anniversary at www.alaskarailroad.com/centennial.

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