

# City of Kingsburg

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A PUBLIC/PRIVATE TRAIN RIDE

ICMA Program Excellence: Community Partnership

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A Swedish community. A historic downtown. A chance for renaissance.

Kingsburg, California is the definition of small town USA. Located in the Central Valley of California, also known as the agricultural fruit basket of the Country, Kingsburg has great schools, safe streets, friendly people, and community-minded individuals. With just over 12,000 citizens, Kingsburg is rife with people and service organizations willing to step up to better their community. This is a story of a public-private partnership that pulled a historical building from the brink of ruin.

### **Our Challenge**

Like many western Cities, Kingsburg was founded based upon the location of a passenger/freight train depot. Constructed by the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1875, the first building was a 2-story, 32 x 110 foot board & batten style depot that was destroyed by fire on September, 1902. It was replaced by a Southern Pacific Standard No. 18 Depot constructed in 1878 on the Southern Pacific East Valley Line at Monson, California, and moved to Kingsburg in 1902.

A busy place for over 100 years, this Depot provided mail service until 1967, passenger service until 1968, and freight service until 1988. The second-story apartment was home to a succession of railroad agents and their families from 1875 until passenger service ended. In 1923 Southern Pacific remodeled the Depot, adding the patio, stucco exterior, brick wainscoting, electric lights, steam heat, larger waiting rooms, indoor plumbing, and restrooms. It served early residents and arriving immigrants seeking inexpensive land and economic opportunity in the developing San Joaquin Valley. The railroad made possible the fast shipment of Valley crops to large markets in eastern America.

At the time of this 1996 photo the Depot had been empty 9 years and had not been maintained by SP for more than 28 years. It was so badly deteriorated that sections of the roof had fallen away and most windows were broken. Many in the city thought the building should be torn down. In the 1980's SP began bulldozing old depots, and the future looked grim. Foreseeing that threat, the City Council applied to Fresno County and State historic status for the building in 1984. Fresno County quickly awarded that status, and the State



followed in 1987. When an SP wrecking crew came into town to knock the building down in 1988, City Manager Robert Kelly showed them the historic status documents, and the imminent crisis was averted. But SP steadfastly refused to let anyone maintain the building, and it became clear they would let it fall down if they couldn't knock it down. Citizens working with the City tried everything possible to obtain ownership of the Depot, but the railroad would only let it go if it was moved from the site. Moving it would have destroyed its historic value and left an empty lot in the heart of downtown.

### **Hope Emerges**

As the building continued to deteriorate, City leaders continued to face an uphill climb that many Cities across the US face as it relates to historic buildings:

*What should a future use be?*

*How can we gain site control access?*

*How will we pay for any improvements?*

In 1996 Union Pacific bought the Southern Pacific Railroad and a ray of hope appeared. Union Pacific takes pride in the history of American railroading. Then City Mayor John Wright met with UP officials, and they agreed to transfer ownership of the Depot to the City. It was a long process, but thanks to Wright's persistence the City finally gained title to the Depot in 2005. Meanwhile a Depot Planning Committee of seven citizens had been appointed by the City Council to determine the best use of the building if it could be restored. An educational use quickly rose to the top of the list. The City had no money to restore the building, so members of the Depot Planning Committee decided to incorporate as a non-profit entity to raise money for a rehabilitation. Friends of the Historic Kingsburg Depot was born on November 17, 2005, and volunteers began cleaning up the site. In 2006 IRS tax-deductible status was granted and the *Friends* Capital Campaign began, and by 2015 nearly \$1,000,000 in private donations of cash and in-kind building materials had been received, and *Friends* volunteers had worked over 16,000 hours at the site.

Still, the issue of full funding remained an outstanding obstacle. Finally, a \$1.2mm federal transportation enhancement grant was secured by the City. Before rehabilitation, the Kingsburg Depot had had no maintenance of any kind for more than 28 years. The second-story of the building was leaning west several inches, portions of the roof structure had fallen completely away, blue sky was visible through ceilings in several rooms, grass grew from the roof, water had entered the building in many places doing significant damage, nearly all window panes were broken, and all major systems including electrical, plumbing, and heating were non-functional.

Beginning in 2014, the site was faithfully returned to a historic 1923 configuration including appearance, furnishings, and artifacts. This configuration was chosen because it represents the last year Southern Pacific made significant changes to the site. During this rehabilitation a few changes were made to satisfy current building codes concerning fire safety, earthquake safety, energy use, and ADA handicap access. All work was done in such a way as to have minimum impact on the authenticity of the site.

In June, the City completed several exterior improvements, including:

- Adjacent road reconstruction
- Addition of pedestrian friendly amenities (sidewalks, crosswalks and ADA improvements)
- Sidewalk/stamped concrete aesthetic improvements
- Landscaping and new tree well additions

Finally, in September, the newly renovated Historic Kingsburg Train Depot held its official Grand Opening. Complete with period actors, an operational kiddie ride train, and an old-fashioned apple pie baking contest.

This picture below is the site after several years of historic rehabilitation, 16,000 hours of volunteer labor, a private fundraising campaign, a public federal grant, and the efforts of an architect, an engineer, two general contractors, and dozens of subcontractors and City officials.



### ***Program implementation and costs***

Ultimately, the entire rehab ended up at nearly \$2.2mm, split between both public and private monetary contributions. This doesn't consider the volunteer hours and in-kind materials donated by local businesses (including corporate partners Guardian Glass, Del-Monte, Fresno Roofing and Sun-Maid Raisins).

### ***Tangible results or measurable outcomes of the program***

A historically correct and beautifully restored train depot located in the heart of the City's downtown. A learning center and living museum that will service 250,000 school aged children in the three-county area. A gathering place and meeting room for City business and private events – in short, a community gem.

### ***Lessons learned during planning, implementation, and analysis of the program.***

The biggest lessons to be learned is to never give up on a project that has merit. Even in the 1980s and 1990s, when all hope seemed lost, community partners were able to see the long term vision of what could-be.

It's also a testament to the force of public/private partnerships and what can be accomplished when like-minded individuals believe in a project. Without private citizens keeping the project alive and donating their time, money and materials; this project wouldn't have been completed. Without City intervention, historic status would have been difficult, and a federal grant not acquired. Simply put, the project doesn't get done without the efforts of both sides.

### ***How the program raises awareness of the contributions of Local Government Managers***

In today's world, we rely on public/private partnerships more than ever. Whether it's a more common economic development project, or the less common public works project (such as this). This particular project took several years, numerous individuals, and the efforts of both private businesses/people and the assistance of the public entity (the City). In the end, it provided a place for the community to be proud of, and enhances our vibrant downtown core.