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New Urbanism planners pick vintage way to travel

By Jeffrey Leib
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The 61-year-old Silver Solarium railcar is parked at Union Station after a group of California urban planners rode it into Denver for a convention. (John Prieto, The Denver Post)

They call it the "sustainable recreational vehicle."

A group of urban planners from California decided to travel in style to the Congress for the New Urbanism gathering that began Wednesday in Denver.

They chartered the Silver Solarium and Silver Rapids, two vintage railcars operated by California Zephyr Railcar Charters, of Costa Mesa, Calif.

The two cars were built in 1948 for the original California Zephyr train that ran between San Francisco and Chicago. That service ended in 1970.

"Life is too short not to spend time doing something like this," said Martin Dreiling, a Burlingame, Calif., architect who joined 11 colleagues riding in cars tacked on the end of Amtrak's scheduled train to Denver.

Amtrak has retained the California Zephyr name for its route between Emeryville, Calif., and Chicago.

Stephen Lawton, economic development director for Hercules, Calif., helped organize the group that chartered the railcars. They paid about \$1,400 each for the one-way trip.

It seems like a lot of money, Lawton acknowledged, until you figure it includes sleeping accommodations and meals for 35 hours of travel.

"The value of the experience was absolutely worth it," said Lawton, whose wife accompanied

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him on the trip. "We've been around the world and seen a lot of things, but this is special."

The Silver Solarium was one of six "Vista-Dome" sleeper lounge observation cars built for the original California Zephyr, said Burt Hermey, president of the charter company that operates three Zephyr railcars.

One motto for the Vista-

Domes on the original Zephyr was "Look up look down look all around," he said.

Another advertising slogan for the train at that time was "The Most Talked About Train in America," he added.

On Wednesday, Lawton still was bubbling about the views of Colorado's high country that travelers had from the glassed observation deck.

Travelers are used to frantically racing to and from airports on business, Lawton said, but "there is nothing more important than an eagle pulling a fish out of a stream, which we saw."

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Steam" trip from Portland, Ore. to Minneapolis in early July. They will be pulled by a steam locomotive. For more information, go to CalZephyrRailcar.com.

The next charter for the California Zephyr railcars is the "Across the Great Northern by

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