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Train enthusiast's Deltona home just one depot

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DELTONA -- Larry DeMatteo hops on a small cycle and angles his knees so he can push the pink pedals forward around his self-made railroad tracks.

N-J | Peter Bauer | BUY THIS PRINT Larry DeMatteo guides an electric locomotive around his backyard train layout in Deltona Tuesday. "I built this for the kids!" he says, hunched over the handle bars as the train wheels wobble beneath him.

Truth is, 70-year-old DeMatteo is the biggest kid on his Barry Drive block. When the Deltona resident isn't posting on political Web forums or scolding city commissioners at public meetings, he's building human-size trains and laying track so he can ride around his 2.5-acre lot.

Who said you had to be a stodgy, suit-clad adult to love politics?

DeMatteo looks out from his overflowing antique shed Tuesday at the railroad signs, windmills and handmade crossing arms that dot his sandy yard. Trees haven't been trimmed from the 2004

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hurricanes, and dirt covers sections of his tracks.

"Sometimes I don't leave the property two, three, four days, unless I run up to Ace Hardware for some nuts and bolts," he says. "I'm just building my railroad stuff, and I'm having so much fun."

His avid collection of trains, "Boston and Maine" signs, lanterns and all things railroad began in the '60s when his wife, Barbara, bought him a \$30 toy train set. First, he needed decorations to make the set more lifelike. Then, he hit up antique shops for parts and memorabilia of the once majestic steam locomotive.

Now, he's so dedicated to his hobby that he's spent "thousands, thousands, thousands," he says, and travels the state with other hobby enthusiasts riding on private and city-run tracks.

Though his wife is in Sanford recovering from a knee replacement surgery and can't speak for herself, he says she's getting tired of dusting all the toys that line their house -- trains, stuffed animals, porcelain dolls and Mr. Christmas music makers.

But no one could deny DeMatteo the pleasure he gets from hand-crafting each intricate piece needed to re-create his rideable trains.

Currently, he's working on a refrigerator train car. He just finished scribing a piece of wood and attaching tiny hinges and metal brads to make it look like an old ice hatch door.

"They call me 'King of Cheap,' " he says. "I come up with all kinds of different ideas using ordinary hardware."

After he moved to Deltona from Massachusetts 20 years ago, he dreamed of opening a museum of all his antiques and allowing visitors to take a train ride outside. He even built his shed to look like a rail station.

"But I'm not a business person," says the retired sheet metal worker, "and insurance (costs) put a kibosh on it."

Sharing his trains or not, though, DeMatteo is having the time of his life. Tuesday, he stands inside a caboose operating handles and levers as if a real train is pulling into a station. Whistles blow, the shrill crossing "ding ding" rings out and red lights flash along the walls.

"Years ago, you didn't have TV, computers, technology gadgets to keep

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you in the house," he says. "The steam engine would go by, that great big black monster with smoke coming out, hearing the whistles and bells -- it's just a powerful machine to see."

When he's had his fun, he'll go inside, clean up and head to City Hall. The gadfly is on a mission to get a sign posted along State Road 472 introducing Howland Boulevard and the entrance to Deltona.

"I'm about to put a sign there myself," he says.

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