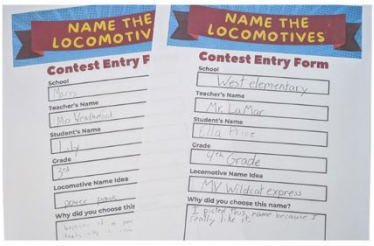
2026 AAPA Lighthouse Award Submission
Community/Educational Outreach

Ports of Indiana Project Title: “Students Name Port Locomotives”

June 12, 2026













Project Summary

This community outreach initiative was created by Ports of Indiana, with the support of OmniTRAX, to celebrate the launch of the Mount Vernon Railroad. To introduce two newly overhauled GP38-2 locomotives and foster local goodwill, a contest was held for Mount Vernon, Indiana, elementary school students to name the engines.

The winning names, "Wildcat Express" and "Power Paws," paid tribute to the local high school mascot and were painted directly onto the locomotives. The initiative culminated in an April 2025 ribbon-cutting ceremony where winning students saw the trains, received gifts, and learned about rail safety.

Investing roughly $8,000, the project successfully shifted local perceptions of industrial port operations. It generated over 70 positive media placements and an estimated $7.3 million in publicity value, providing a highly scalable model for future community engagement with new port equipment investments.

1. Background, Purpose, & Goals

Background

Ports of Indiana is a statewide port authority operating three maritime facilities that connect Indiana businesses to global markets through multimodal transportation, industrial development, and supply chain infrastructure. As a self-funded enterprise, Ports of Indiana is dedicated to growing Indiana's economy by developing and maintaining a world-class port system and serving as a statewide resource for maritime issues, international trade, and multimodal logistics. Ports of Indiana-Mount Vernon is the state's largest port by tonnage, handling millions of tons of agricultural, industrial, and energy commodities annually. The 1,200-acre port is home to a 500-acre multimodal megasite and generates approximately $1.6 billion in annual economic impact while supporting more than 8,000 regional jobs.

In June 2024, Ports of Indiana announced a transformative partnership with OmniTRAX - the nation's largest privately held, family-owned rail transportation company - to create Mount Vernon Railroad as the new switching carrier for Ports of Indiana-Mount Vernon.

As part of this business venture, Ports of Indiana and OmniTRAX sought a meaningful way to introduce the new railroad to the Mount Vernon community and to connect with local residents. Two newly overhauled, repainted GP38-2 locomotives were ready for service. Working with the local school system, Ports of Indiana held a contest that allowed local school children to name two newly overhauled locomotives. Once the winners were selected, programs at each school announced the winners and recognized the student who submitted the winning name. The names were then painted on the locomotives, and the classrooms were invited to the port to see them in person at the ribbon-cutting ceremony. Giving the community a stake in naming the locomotives became the centerpiece of an innovative, inclusive, and deeply local community engagement initiative.

Purpose and Goals
The initiative was designed to achieve these goals:

- *Community connection*: Create a tangible, memorable way for Mount Vernon's youngest residents to feel ownership in the port and pride in their community's infrastructure.
- *Educational awareness*: Introduce elementary-age students to the role of ports, railroads, and multimodal logistics in their region and economy.
- *PR amplification*: Use the locomotive naming contest and student involvement to generate positive, human-interest media coverage around the Mount Vernon Railroad grand opening, broadening community awareness and goodwill.
- *Marketing announcement:* Promotion of new rail partnership to local and national audiences to support rail business development at the port.
- *Rebrand railroads and ports:* Reposition railroads and ports as positive symbols in the community. Shift perception away from traffic disruptions, block crossings, noise, and air pollution to a positive image of jobs, economic drivers, and important contributions to the local community.

2. Implementation & Resources

Phase 1: Contest Design and School Outreach (Fall 2024)
Ports of Indiana collaborated with Mount Vernon Community School Corporation Superintendent Dr. Stephanie Stewart and school administrators from all three Mount Vernon elementary schools to introduce the contest to students and teachers. The contest was simple and inclusive: students were invited to submit name ideas for two new locomotives, with the winning names to be painted on the engines and unveiled at the grand opening ceremony. Contest materials were distributed to all three local elementaries – Marrs Elementary, West Elementary, and Farmersville Elementary. Teachers incorporated the contest into classroom discussions about trains, transportation, and the port's role in the local economy. The contest generated broad student participation across all grade levels.

Phase 2: Winner Selection and School Visits (December 2024)
Ports of Indiana CEO Jody Peacock and Port Director Jason May, along with Ports of Indiana Communications staff, personally visited all three elementary schools to announce the winning names. The visits were a celebration: each winning classroom received an engraved locomotive bell provided by OmniTRAX, and all Mount Vernon elementary students received a foam replica locomotive model provided by Ports of Indiana. The four winning classrooms were also invited to visit the port in the spring to see the locomotives in action.

The winning names – "Wildcat Express" and "Power Paws" – were both tributes to the Mount Vernon High School Wildcats mascot, a deliberate nod to local identity and community pride. Ports of Indiana was able to celebrate winners at all three schools because three students submitted "Wildcat Express" (Huck Bushard, 1st grade, Marrs; Ella Price, 4th grade, West; Mya Trout, 2nd grade, Farmersville), and one student submitted "Power Paws" (Lillian Falls, 3rd grade, Marrs).

Phase 3: Ribbon-Cutting Event with Student Participation (April 22, 2025)
The locomotive naming story reached its public culmination at the April 22, 2025 Mount Vernon Railroad ribbon-cutting ceremony. Winning students and their classmates visited the port to see the freshly painted locomotives bearing their chosen names for the first time. The event drew state and local officials, including Mount Vernon Mayor Steve Loehr, and Evansville Regional Economic Partnership CEO Lloyd Winnecke, as well as executive leadership from OmniTRAX and Ports of Indiana. Student participation was woven into the ribbon-cutting ceremony, making the children and the naming contest central to the event narrative. The locomotives are 2,000-horsepower GP38-2 engines built by the Electro-Motive Division of General Motors and have received significant engine overhauls and new paint schemes that now prominently feature the student-chosen names. OmniTRAX co-sponsored the initiative and provided the engraved locomotive bells presented to winning classrooms.

Resources
This initiative required minimal financial investment by Ports of Indiana relative to its impact. Key resources included staff time from Ports of Indiana marketing, communications, port operations teams, and OmniTRAX staff. Financial expenses were shared with OmniTRAX and included rental materials for the event, food, and giveaway items (locomotive bells, student prizes, and ribbon-cutting event items), totaling approximately $8,000. The contest was embedded within the larger Mount Vernon Railroad launch, leveraging existing momentum and stakeholder relationships. Our partner, OnmiTRAX, spent approximately $50,000 to have the locomotives painted and logos applied.

3. Innovation & Relevance

Ports are often perceived as distant industrial facilities with little connection to the daily lives of community residents. This initiative challenged that perception through a creative, child-centered engagement strategy that reframed the port as something personally meaningful to families and students in Mount Vernon.

Rather than a traditional ribbon-cutting or press event, Ports of Indiana designed the railroad launch around the community, literally putting the names they created on the locomotives that would move thousands of railcars each year. This innovative approach was the first time Ports of Indiana had ever implemented a naming contest for local school kids. The program created a permanent, visible, daily reminder of community involvement in port operations. Every time the “Wildcat Express” or “Power Paws” moves through the port, it carries the names chosen by local students.

Inland ports like Mount Vernon face a specific communications challenge: unlike coastal ports with visible maritime activity, their operations are often invisible to local residents and difficult to connect to everyday life. This initiative directly addressed that challenge by:

- Visiting students at their schools versus only asking them to come to the port

- Using a universally relatable train theme to generate engagement across all demographics
- Tying locomotive names to local school identity (Wildcats), reinforcing that the port is part of the community fabric
- Following through with tangible rewards (bells, locomotive replicas, a spring port visit) that extended the relationship beyond a single event

The locomotive naming contest was so successful that Ports of Indiana is planning to use it again for future equipment celebrations, including a new crane that recently arrived at the port. The model integrates naturally into existing school structures, leverages teacher-administrator relationships, and generates media interest through the human-interest angle of children's involvement. It also easily connects with young children who often play with trains, boats, cranes, and similar equipment that is found in ports.

4. Results, Evidence, & Impact

Community Engagement Outcomes

The initiative engaged all three Mount Vernon elementary schools and generated widespread student participation across multiple grade levels, from 1st through 5th grade. Winning students and their classmates attended the grand opening event in April 2025, connecting the classroom experience to a real-world community milestone. The spring port visit gave winning classrooms a firsthand look at rail operations and port infrastructure, deepening the educational impact. The students also alerted the winners' families, so parents and grandparents were able to attend to see the award presentations and take photos with their families' contest winners.

Mount Vernon School Superintendent Dr. Stephanie Stewart described the initiative as "a special honor for our students" and praised the opportunity to "connect our students with things going on in the Mount Vernon community." Her support reflects the value school leadership placed on the program as an educational and civic engagement opportunity.
While the winning classes visited the ports to see the painted locomotives, representatives from the port and from Operation Lifesaver, a non-profit dedicated to rail safety education, gave presentations to the kids about the importance of ports and railroads, as well as rail safety. The students also got to take home various gifts, including a train whistle.

Media Coverage and Earned Media Impact

The human-interest story of students naming locomotives generated extraordinary media coverage that amplified the Mount Vernon Railroad grand opening far beyond what a traditional press event would have achieved. Coverage was tracked from April 22 through May 21, 2025:

- 70 total media placements across broadcast, online, and trade outlets
- 35 unique media outlets covered the story

- 38 broadcast television segments across Evansville-area network affiliates (WFIE/NBC, WEHT/ABC, WEVV/FOX, WTVW/CW)
- National publicity value of approximately $7.3 million
- Audience reach of more than 800,000 across tracked placements
- 100% positive or neutral tone across all 70 placements (zero negative coverage)
- Coverage spanned local, regional, national, and industry media:
    - Local television: Multiple segments across all Evansville-market TV stations, including WFIE (NBC), WEHT (ABC), WEVV (FOX), WTVW (CW) – covering morning, noon, afternoon, evening, and late-night newscasts over two days
    - Statewide: Inside Indiana Business with Gerry Dick (WISH-TV Indianapolis, syndicated to TV stations in Indianapolis, Terre Haute, Fort Wayne, and Evansville); WIBC-FM Indianapolis (105,200 audience reach)
    - National consumer: Yahoo! Finance (national, $26,887 publicity value); Yahoo News; FreightWaves; NewsBreak
    - Trade press: Progressive Railroading, American Journal of Transportation, Railway Track & Structures, Trains magazine, Expansion Solutions, Maritime Logistics Professional, FreightWaves
    - Social media: Coverage shared by Conexus Indiana, Inside Indiana Business, FreightWaves, and 14 News Facebook pages

The student angle was prominently featured in nearly every piece of coverage. Multiple broadcast stations led their segments with the locomotive-naming story and footage of students at the grand opening, demonstrating that this community engagement strategy drove the narrative in ways a standard economic development announcement could not.

Long-Term Symbolic Impact

The "Wildcat Express" and "Power Paws" locomotives now operate daily at Ports of Indiana-Mount Vernon, switching approximately 25,000 railcars per year and serving companies such as Consolidated Grain & Barge, Valero Renewable Fuels, Nutrien, and others. Each time these locomotives operate, they carry the community's identity. Port Director Jason May noted at the grand opening: "These locomotives will move thousands of railcars each year, allowing millions of tons of cargo to reach customers. We're proud to engage with the Mount Vernon community and share the many benefits of our port."

5. Integration, Adaptability, & Scalability

Integration with Existing Operations and Strategy

The locomotive naming initiative was fully integrated into Ports of Indiana's broader Mount Vernon Railroad launch strategy, rather than existing as a standalone outreach effort. It was embedded in the operational timeline of the railroad's rollout: the contest launched when the partnership was announced, the winners were revealed before the grand opening, and the student visit to the port was built into the ribbon-cutting ceremony itself. This integration ensured that the community engagement element was not an add-on but a core part of how the railroad was introduced.

The initiative also aligns with Ports of Indiana's ongoing commitment to community engagement at all three ports, extending a broader organizational philosophy of being good neighbors and active community partners.

Adaptability
This model is highly adaptable. The port just acquired its largest-ever crane and plans to execute a similar naming program in the future. Ports operating, cranes, tugs, or other named equipment could employ the same approach. The contest structure can be modified to engage different audiences, such as middle school students could be tasked with designing a logo, high school students with writing a tagline, or community members with voting on finalists. The core mechanism is giving the community a voice in something.

Scalability
Ports of Indiana operates three ports across Indiana. The model developed at Mount Vernon could be replicated at Burns Harbor or Jeffersonville when similar infrastructure opportunities arise. Beyond Ports of Indiana, this approach offers a replicable template for any AAPA member port seeking to build community awareness and goodwill around infrastructure investments. The low cost and high impact profile make it especially attractive for smaller ports with limited outreach budgets.

6. Stakeholder Engagement & Collaboration

School System Partnership
The initiative was built on a genuine partnership with Mount Vernon Community School Corporation. Ports of Indiana worked directly with Superintendent Dr. Stephanie Stewart and principals and teachers at all three elementary schools to design and implement the contest. Teachers incorporated the railroad theme into classroom discussions, extending the educational value beyond the contest itself. The school district's enthusiastic participation – reflected in Dr. Stewart's public comments – was essential to the program's reach and credibility.

OmniTRAX
OmniTRAX, the railroad operator, was a full co-sponsor of the initiative, painted the locomotives, and brought in executives to celebrate the event. OmniTRAX also provided engraved locomotive bells for each winning classroom, participated in school visits, and prominently featured student involvement in its communications around the grand opening. The collaboration extended the initiative's reach into OmniTRAX's national communications channels.

Local Government and Economic Development Partners
Mount Vernon Mayor Steve Loehr and Evansville Regional Economic Partnership CEO Lloyd Winnecke participated in the grand opening ceremony and were among the officials who highlighted the community connection created by student involvement.

Broader Community
By engaging students across all three elementary schools in the district, the initiative touched virtually every family in Mount Vernon with elementary-age children. The giveaways distributed to all elementary students, not just winning classrooms, ensured that every child who participated received a tangible reminder of their connection to the port. The spring port visits for winning classrooms extended the community relationship beyond the contest itself.

7. Conclusion

The "Wildcat Express" and "Power Paws" locomotive naming initiative exemplifies how community engagement, strategic communications, and port improvements can seamlessly intertwine. By embedding a student-centered outreach program into the launch of a transformative $25 million railroad investment, Ports of Indiana turned a major operational milestone into a deeply resonant community story. Inviting Mount Vernon's elementary students to name two new locomotives at the state's largest port created an immediate bond with local families, school administrators, elected officials, and the media alike.

The tangible results speak clearly: the initiative generated more than 70 media placements, $7.3 million in national publicity value, and extensive positive coverage. More importantly, it fostered lasting goodwill and a personal connection to port infrastructure that will serve the region for decades. The "Wildcat Express" and "Power Paws" locomotives now operate daily at Ports of Indiana-Mount Vernon, long after the initial press coverage has faded, serving as a lasting, prominent symbol of community pride with every railcar they move. Ultimately, this initiative offers a highly replicable model for ports seeking to bridge the gap between industrial operations and community identity.

Beacon of Excellence Award Statement

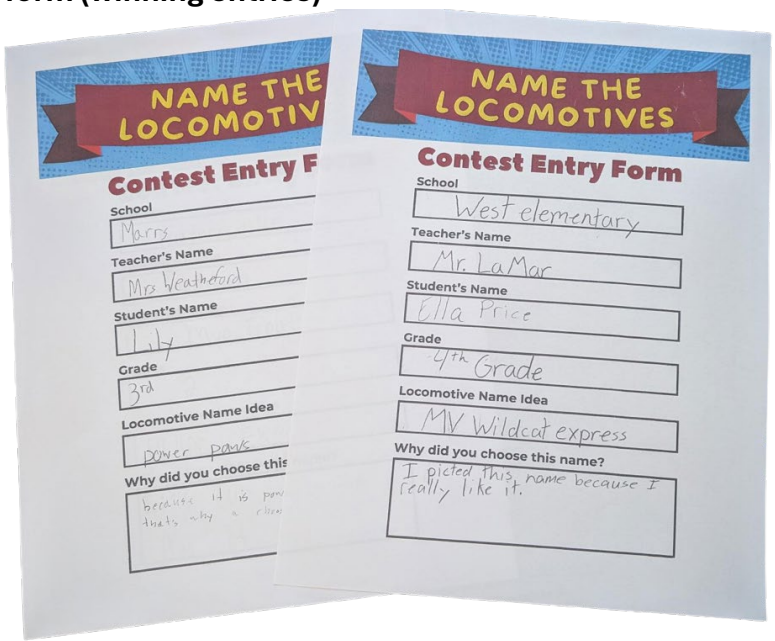
The project "Students Name Port Locomotives" qualifies for the Beacon of Excellence Award because it demonstrates an outstanding, cross-cutting impact that spans multiple AAPA award categories. While submitted under Community/Educational Outreach, the initiative successfully integrated a major Economic Development and Facility/Infrastructure milestone by turning a transformative $25 million rail investment into a deeply local partnership. Additionally, the project functioned as a highly effective Public Relations Campaign, generating $7.3 million in national publicity value and shifting public perceptions of industrial port operations into positive symbols of community identity. By blending infrastructure expansion with deep civic engagement, the project delivers the multi-category excellence and measurable results required of a Beacon recipient.

Contest Materials

1: Contest flyer distributed to participating schools



2: Contest entry form (winning entries)



School Visits & Winners Announcements

1: Foam locomotives for each student at the school



Item 2: Kids' assembly at schools





Item 2: Winners receiving bells

Ports of Indiana Staff pictured: Jody Peacock, CEO; Ashley Block, Operations Manager; Jason May, Port Director



Railroad Celebration Event



Ports of Indiana CEO Jody Peacock



Mount Vernon Mayor Steve Loehr



E-REP CEO Lloyd Winnecke



OmniTRAX CCO Ryan Higgins



Left to right: Mount Vernon, Ind., Mayor Steve Loehr, OmniTRAX COO Ryan Higgins, Ports of Indiana-Mount Vernon Port Director Jason May, Ports of Indiana CEO Jody Peacock, & E-REP CEO Lloyd Winnecke



Giveaways at ribbon-cutting event



Mount Vernon elementary students walking to see locomotives



Mount Vernon students learn about locomotives from OmniTRAX



Mount Vernon elementary students cheer Wildcat Express



Mount Vernon elementary students with "Power Paws"



Freshly-painted and overhauled GP38 locomotives in OmniTRAX's livery, showing off 'Wildcat Express' and 'Power Paws' logos – and community pride.

Press Coverage Sample

1: Sample Press Coverage from April 22, 2025 Release



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Officials celebrate opening of Mount Vernon Railroad creating 'Mega-Modal' opportunity for Southwest IN port

posted by AJOT | Apr 23 2025 at 09:35 AM | Intermodal

State and local officials celebrated the grand opening of the Mount Vernon Railroad today, creating an unparalleled "Mega-Modal" opportunity for Southwest Indiana. The railroad is a partnership between OmniTRAX – the nation's largest privately-held, family-owned rail transportation company – and Ports of Indiana-Mount Vernon – the state's largest port.

To commemorate the event, local elementary students visited the port to see the two locomotives they helped name – "Power Paws" and "Wildcat Express" – and to learn about ports and rail safety.

THE PORT FOR OUR NATION

As part of the ribbon-cutting ceremony, Ports of Indiana and OmniTRAX officials coined the term "Mega-Modal" to describe the large-scale economic development opportunity created by this new partnership and the port's multimodal megasite.

Owned by Ports of Indiana and operated by OmniTRAX, Mount Vernon Railroad serves as the switching carrier for the Mount Vernon port. The port handles an average of 25,000 railcars annually and is home to a 500-acre megasite targeted for large-scale multimodal development. The port is currently investing $25 million to support steel, automotive, plastics, energy, and heavy industrial growth, and attract large multimodal industries that rely on barge and rail transportation.

The port's megasite combines access to four Class I railroads, the largest inland port district in the U.S. by tonnage, and OmniTRAX's robust economic development resources as part of The Broe Group, a private, multi-billion-dollar infrastructure company with diversified holdings throughout 41 North American states and provinces. Denver-based OmniTRAX operates a total of 29 industrial railroads across the U.S. and Canada, along with 52 transload facilities and five industrial parks.

Officials participating in the grand opening ceremony included Ports of Indiana CEO Jody Peacock, OmniTRAX Chief Commercial Officer Ryan Higgins, Mount Vernon Mayor Steve Loehr, Evansville Regional Economic Partnership CEO Lloyd Winnecke and business and community leaders.

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CN to support BHP's Jansen Potash Mine with rail access to global markets

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American Journal of Transportation, April 23, 2025