



MSU

Explores Railroad Recovery

By Karen Brasher

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The 92 miles of rail connecting Greenwood and West Point were considered inoperative in 2002, but work is under way to revive the link between the Delta and the eastern part of the state.

It has gone through several name changes, but what is today the Columbus and Greenville Railway, commonly referred to as C&G, was built in the late 1800s to ship cotton and other agricultural products out of the Delta to points in the Southeast. Most of the line was taken out of operation in 2002 because costly repairs were needed for the 156 bridges and deteriorating track throughout the six counties—Webster, Clay, Oktibbeha, Carroll, Montgomery and Leflore—in the line.

“When the railroad first made its way through Mississippi, it not only transported goods but indirectly helped establish rural communities near the railroad depots,” said Cynthia Wilson, Webster County development council executive director.

When the line first became inactive, the idea for a “rails for trails” tourism line developed. However, after meeting with other economic developers in the six counties and officials with the railroad, it became apparent that the best option was to refurbish the line, Wilson added.

“We also had to establish a regional rail authority in order to acquire state and federal support in refurbishing the line,” Wilson said. “By establishing a regional rail authority and

an executive board, we will hopefully secure funding for the rail line.”

The economic development council applied for and received a \$40,000 grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission to initiate an exploratory study of revitalizing the Columbus and Greenville Railroad line. Wilson, a retired MSU Extension employee, immediately turned to the university for help.

An MSU team including experts from the Mississippi State Community Action Team, Industrial Outreach Service, Political Science and Administration, and Industrial and Systems Engineering was assembled to address the potential of the inactive railway.

“In light of escalating fuel prices, rail is the most fuel-efficient and environmentally friendly mode of transportation,” said Roger Bell, president and chief executive officer for the C&G railway. “Rail transport is also considered an advantage many times when an industry is looking to locate to an area.”

The MSU team is evaluating the impact of reopening the line on recruitment of industry to north-central Mississippi by estimating how it would affect freight flow throughout the state.

“Currently, there is not an east-west line north of Jackson,” said Bill Martin, Industrial Outreach Service project manager. “The research team will determine what, if any, benefit will be realized in the distribution of goods, including use of the Port of Greenville, the state’s largest river port.”

The cost to renovate the line is estimated to be almost \$40 million. To determine if the benefits will outweigh the cost, the team is evaluating the economic potential to rural counties, including the role a rail line will have in attracting industry, Martin added.

The MSU-led project includes the creation of a freight-flow map for Mississippi to demonstrate how goods move through and around the state.

“The team will evaluate the inactive line to determine if reopening would improve the movement of goods considering the other modes of transportation,” Martin said. “This includes reviewing the current transportation system that serves Mississippi and the region including the ports of Mobile, New Orleans, Greenwood and Memphis.”

The research team is also conducting informal, one-on-one interviews with industry representatives to determine the current methods and cost of freight shipment used by regional industries.

The interviews will determine if and how much refurbishment of the line will result in cost savings to industries. Upon completion of the project, a market assessment of refurbishing the line will be presented to C&G.

Martin, however, is already optimistic about the potential.

“We see, on this dormant railroad, an opportunity to improve transportation and attract new industry to the state,” he said.

If he is right, the sounds of locomotives may return to many small towns in central Mississippi.