

Record: 1

Title: Tracking Economic Development.

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Source: Georgia Trend; Jul2003, Vol. 18 Issue 11, p98, 1p, 1 color

Document Type: Article

Subject Terms: RAILROADS -- Georgia
ECONOMIC development
TECHNICAL assistance

Geographic Terms: GEORGIA
UNITED States

Abstract: A railroad renaissance is underway in Sumter County, where two reborn train lines have opened new opportunities for economic development. "Our growth has been strong and the outlook is great," says Brad Lafevers, president of the Heart of Georgia Railroad, an Americus-based line operating along 135 miles of track between Vidalia and Preston. Last year the Heart of Georgia Railroad hauled 7,900 cars of agriculture and timber products. Last year, the Heart of Georgia succeeded in making connections to the Port of Brunswick and began hauling wheat to the ships there. Lafevers' railroad provides the locomotive and technical assistance for another railroad enterprise, the SAM Excursion Train, which carries tourists off I-75 at Cordele to Americus, Plains and Archery, the boyhood home of Jimmy Carter.

Lexile: 1240

Full Text Word Count: 490

ISSN: 08825971

Accession Number: 10449560

Database: MasterFILE Premier

Section: Americus

Tracking Economic Development

A railroad renaissance is underway in Sumter County, where two reborn train lines have opened new opportunities for economic development. Cargo and passengers are traveling the tracks, and railroad boosters in the region are beginning to associate the lonesome whistle of the choo-choo with the ka-ching of the cash register.

"Our growth has been strong and the outlook is great," says Brad Lafevers, president of the Heart of Georgia Railroad, an Americus-based line operating along 135 miles of track between Vidalia and Preston. That stretch of rail carried about 2,500 rail cars per year before Lafevers' company bought it in 2000. Last year the Heart of Georgia Railroad hauled 7,900 cars of agriculture and timber products.

For Lafevers, the growth represents a rare-opportunity for underserved rural areas to begin economic development projects they could never have hoped for in the past. "When we began operations, we literally had to go out between the tracks and cut down pine trees big enough For the pulpwood mill," he says. "Since then, we have added tour new industries to the line and two are now involved in rail-based expansion that will add 150 to 200 new jobs."

Last year, the Heart of Georgia succeeded in making connections to the Port of Brunswick and began hauling wheat to the ships there. Plans are in the works to make similar connections to Savannah. "We work hard on economic development," says Lafevers. "By the end of the year, we believe we will add service to an industrial park along I-75." The line, one of 12 short lines in Georgia, has 30 cargo customers and leases tracks from the state, a somewhat unique arrangement, according to Lafevers. Georgia owns about 500 miles of rail lines.

Lafevers' railroad provides the locomotive and technical assistance for another railroad enterprise, the SAM Excursion Train, which carries tourists off I-75 at Cordele to Americus, Plains and Archery, the boyhood home of Jimmy Carter. The SAM line was an immediate success and now carries about 250 passengers on its Thursday, Friday and Saturday schedule. The train stops for two hours in Americus one day a week and retailers there are enjoying new exposure to Florida-bound tourists.

But a significant number of riders come from within a 60-mile radius of the excursion route. "Whether they are tourists or neighbors, the grandfathers and grandmothers want to show the kids what it is like to ride a train," says Kathy Odom, manager of the SAM Shortline Excursion Train.

The Excursion Train's \$693,000 budget is funded by the state and by collected fares. It was begun in an effort to stimulate economic development in the counties along its route. The 1940s-era train cars can hold up to 425 passengers who pay from \$10 (children) to \$30 (first class) for the day trips.

PHOTO (COLOR): Kathy Odom, manager, SAM Shortline Excursion Train

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By Ed Lightsey

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