



AT BUS AND COACH INTERNATIONAL in Jennings, Congressman Jerry Moran talked to Lois Heilman after a tour of the headquarters. — Photo by Kimberly Davis/The Oberlin Herald

Bus company recycles old school

By Kimberly Davis

The Oberlin Herald
kldavis@nwkansas.com

Bus and Coach International, headquartered in the old Jennings school, opened in early January and provides about 30 jobs in the area.

The firm makes and sells motor coaches "built by operators for operators,"

Larry Brennan, vice president in charge of the Jennings operation, said the company is excited about north-west Kansas and the opportunities and quality of life and the work force here. The company bought the old Jennings school the year after it closed and renovated it.

Some people had been forced to leave the area, he said, because they couldn't find a job they wanted. Bus and Coach has provided a big lure and people have come back from bigger

cities to join the team, he said.

The bus business also hired people already here. One of those is Office Manager Lois Heilman, who worked for the school district for 30 years.

At the open house on Jan. 6, said Mr. Brennan, the company unveiled its first product, the BCI Falcon 45 motorcoach. This coach incorporates decades of operating experience in a new design in technology to benefit the operator with lower acquisition and operating costs, he said.

By the end of the year, said Mr. Brennan, the company will have sold more than 50 of the coaches, built in China to U.S. specifications, double the projected number.

The company just placed an order for 100 new Caterpillar engines, he said, which shows its confidence level. They also use Cummins motors in the buses, he added.

The 2008 model, said Mr. Brennan, has several improvements, including the first coach in the industry to feature an all Caterpillar drive train, with a CX 31 automatic transmission.

He said, BCI is the first to feature a system which alerts the driver of someone next to the bus when he is turning. It also can see ahead in bad weather when the driver can't and will apply the brakes to avoid a collision.

Ultimately, all of the new coaches will undergo a predelivery inspection from Jennings, Mr. Brennan said. The facility will be able to refurbish used motor coaches taken in on trade, he said.

The firm's long term goals, said Mr. Brennan, are to expand into other markets and start manufacturing here.

One big need is a jet-capable runway at the Oberlin airport, a project the city and county are pushing.

Longer runway would help area

By Kimberly Davis

The Oberlin Herald
kldavis@nwkansas.com

A project to build a new 7,000-foot runway to allow business jets to take off and land at the Oberlin airport has drawn interest from state and federal officials.

The airport, built just after World War II north of town, is used by smaller planes, including light general aviation craft, crop dusters and air ambulance. The city, said City Administrator Gary Shike, owns the land and some of the buildings, though some buildings are privately owned.

In 1964, the north-south runway was paved and in 1971 an overlay was put on the asphalt surface, he said. Airport operations are paid for out of the city's general fund, said Mr. Shike. In the past, improvements have been made with money from Kansas Department of Transportation grants.

Talks started on lengthening the runway when Bus and Coach International, a firm which imports buses made in China, moved into Jennings. Larry Brennan, vice president of the bus company at the Jennings headquarters, said airports are the 21st century equivalent for freeways. Look at the extent for which we take for granted overnight package delivery, he said.

Airports and facilities, said Mr. Brennan, are a key part of progress.

The county and city, he said, have done a good job of showing a need for the project. Several businesses here could use a 7,000-foot runway. There is a regional need for the longer runway.

The city won't know the cost for the project until its engineering consultants, Bucher, Willis and Ratliff out of Kansas City, finish the design, he said, but it could be \$4 million to \$5 million or more. Until then, members of the City Council, county commissioners, runway committee members and oth-

ers are working on gaining support from state and federal officials.

In June, about 30 runway boosters, including city, county and economic development officials, rode a BCI bus to Kansas City for a meeting with the Federal Aviation Administration. Mr. Shike said he didn't think the administration had seen that many people at a meeting in support of a project before.

Backers are trying to show what an airport like this in Oberlin could do for northwest Kansas, he said.

Part of the process is finding money to build a new, longer runway, as the old one can't be lengthened.

Mr. Shike said the Federal Aviation Administration can offer money up to 95 percent of the project cost while the Kansas Department of Transportation provides up to 90 percent of the cost. The community will also have to raise some of the money, he said.

The city has some federal money set aside for improvements, Mr. Shike said. Just because they want to put in a longer runway doesn't mean the old one doesn't need to be kept usable, he said.

The consultants are done with stage 1 of the airport plan and moving into stage 2 — producing a design plan and price tag 10 to 11 months down the road, a 315-day process, he said.

The city will need an environmental review, looking for any problems such as animal issues or archaeological finds, and buy some land, which hasn't been done yet, he added.

The whole community has to help, said Mr. Shike. A new runway isn't going to be built here just because the community says they want it; people will have to get out and do some work.

Members of the Oberlin Business Alliance, Oberlin Rotary Club, Decatur County commissioners and other groups and individuals have sent letters to Congress and state officials to show a need for the longer runway.

Milk — Bread — USDA Choice Meats
Groceries — Full Service Deli — Fresh Produce
Ice — Pop — Picnic Supplies
Fresh Salad Bar — Beer — Lottery Tickets



Store Hours: 7 a.m.-9 p.m. Mon.-Sat.
Sunday 9 a.m.-6 p.m.

RAYE'S GROCERY, INC.

HOME-OWNED & HOME-OPERATED — VIDEO RENTALS
119 W. Commercial — Oberlin — Phone 785-475-2952



\$17.99
price per gallon

- Highly reflective non-yellowing flat finish
- Excellent one-coat hiding
- Spatter resistant



THE LOWEST PRICES OF THE YEAR ON CEILING PAINT.
Look up to the beauty of Martin-Senour® Ceiling paint and see incredible savings. This top-quality ceiling paint brightens rooms and hides minor surface imperfections for superior results. Hurry in! Sale ends soon.

Home Planning Center

180 South Penn, Oberlin

Phone 785-475-2325