

Road to rail



Modified excavator loads limestone aggregate from a rail car into waiting Glenn O. Hawbaker Inc. trucks. A partnership among Hawbaker, the Joint Rail Authority, Nittany & Bald Eagle and Lycoming Valley Railroad, has paid dividends for both organizations.

Regional partnership lets company better use its trucks

By MATT HUTCHINSON
Sun-Gazette Staff

A partnership between a regional heavy construction business and a railroad has paid dividends for both organizations.

Last spring, Glenn O. Hawbaker Inc., the SEDA-Council of Government's Joint Rail Authority, Nittany & Bald Eagle and Lycoming Valley Railroad, agreed on a deal that moves limestone aggregate for asphalt production on the two rail lines.

The equivalent of 13,000 truckloads was transported, in a sense "removing" that many truck trips from the highways last year, the partners said. That allowed Hawbaker to make more efficient use of its trucks.

The process, which involves transport of the aggregate material from a quarry in Pleasant Gap to Hawbaker's asphalt plant in Montoursville, doesn't really save the company money, but "the biggest thing is to better utilize our equipment," said Russ Graham, the company's director of transportation.

Before the rail lines were used, trucks delivered the material on a 120-mile round trip. Half of that route involved empty Hawbaker trucks on the highway for more than an hour.

Todd Hunter, director of marketing for the North Shore Railroad and affiliated companies (including the

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Russ Graham
Glenn O. Hawbaker Inc.
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Nittany & Bald Eagle and Lycoming Valley lines) headquartered in Northumberland, said the plan had been in the works for a while.

"We approached them several years ago about (service to) the Montoursville plant," Hunter said. "A year or so we finally came to terms."

Material is only transported from about April to November because of the seasonal nature of asphalt production and because of state Department of Transportation regulations, Hunter added.

Upon arrival at the Montoursville plant along Canfield Lane, the aggregate material is unloaded with a special cartop machine from a company in Roanoke, Va. The distance between the railroad and the plant necessitates the need for the special unloading equipment.

"The rail track currently does not go to the plant," Hunter said. "They actually have a patented machine

that walks on top of the rail cars and unloads the cars from the top."

Added Graham of Hawbaker: "Without having cartop unloading ability, we would be unable to do this haul."

But the most impressive achievement of the partnership is the reduction of truck transportation on area highways, something SEDA-COG's rail authority hopes will catch with other businesses.

In fact, the nation's freight rail system only carries 16 percent of all good, according to information supplied by the regional multi-county development agency in Lewisburg.

If just 1 more percent of freight was carried via rail, it would transfer 600 million tons of freight and 25 billion vehicle-miles-of-travel off the highway while saving shippers \$239 billion and reduce associated highway costs by \$17 billion, the report indicated.

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Partnership lets company better use its trucks

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Hunter said that Hawbaker's Pleasant Gap-to-Montoursville route has helped to boost shipments on the regional rail lines.

More than 1.1 million tons of aggregate material is expected to be shipped this year on the regional rail lines, Hunter added. That's compared to just 8,600 tons in 1986.

That fact has helped the North Shore Railroad and the Nittany & Bald Eagle line win a 2003 marketing award from the American Shortline and Regional Railroad Association for its work with Hawbaker. The line also was selected as one of the top 100 businesses in central Pennsylvania by Pennsylvania Business Central, a regional business publication.

Several of the manufacturers that

shipped goods on the local rail lines have closed their doors during the past few years.

"That could have been devastating, but through aggressive marketing we were able to capture other business for the railroad," Hunter said.

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