

Moore County's Odd Couple

IT'S long been said that politics makes strange bedfellows. It turns out industrial development also can bring about unlikely liaisons.

In Moore County, an unusual courtship that began 19 months ago has resulted in the birth of a 125-acre industrial property that could grow into a significant generator of jobs.

The land, located in the Town of Aberdeen just south of Pinehurst and west of Ft. Bragg, was cobbled together by industrial developers with Aberdeen & Rockfish Railroad and officials of the Sandhills Area Land Trust, a multi-county conservation organization based in Southern Pines.

The two sides worked together in getting the property, known as Ironhorse Industrial Park, certified by the North Carolina Department of Commerce, a move to help entice one or more industrial tenants.

Ed Lewis, president of the 114-year-old railroad, admits the partnership with an environmental group is not typical. Such interests often align against each other on issues of land use.

But the objectives of the two entities overlapped in an opportune way. With the help of the county's economic development agency both parties have, in joining forces, moved closer to their respective goals.

"People with good intentions that have the best interests of the community at heart, even if they're coming from different angles, can find common ground," says Lewis, whose railroad owns 40 percent of the new park.

In addition to marketing its share of the property, the railroad hopes to find a buyer that could benefit from the park's rail capacity. As a short-line railroad, A&R's tracks connect the property to main-line service from either Norfolk-Southern or CSX, a unique advantage that puts the park's tenants closer to raw materials and customers around North America.

For the Sandhills Area Land Trust, which was given its share of the property in 2001 by a benefactor, the deal could result in cash that it hopes to use to buy



Left to right, Ray Ogden, president, Moore County Partners in Progress, consulting with Richard Perritt, executive director, Sandhills Area Land Trust, and Edward Lewis, president, Aberdeen & Rockfish Railroad Co.

and preserve land that has greater environmental significance.

"We would reinvest the proceeds in accordance with our mission," says Richard Perritt, executive director of the trust.

He hopes the sale of the Ironhorse property might fetch enough to let his group acquire an upland track that could expand the habitat of the longleaf pine. "There isn't much funding these days for such things. So there's a gap where we could apply these financial resources," says Perritt.

Getting a property certified requires a comprehensive analysis of its archeological, environmental, zoning and infrastructural characteristics. The railroad footed the entire \$20,000 cost of certification.

"Working through all the state requirements was what really got us on board," says Perritt. He makes no secret of the trust's hope that a "green" industry, such as a bio-diesel fuel production site, might be recruited to Ironhorse.

"We certainly haven't preconditioned any particular industry that can purchase the property," says Perritt. "The trust is interested in generating employment for Moore County. That's our main criterion."

Along with presenting a curious collab-

orative opportunity, Ironhorse Industrial Park also fits neatly into Moore County's job creation strategy, according to Ray Ogden, president of Moore County Partners in Progress, which oversees economic development for the county.

"With this park, we can now compete with anybody as far as sites," says Ogden.

The timing of the property's certification could not be better. In the wake of the post-BRAC expansion of Ft. Bragg, Ogden has been approaching military suppliers that could benefit by relocating or expanding into the Sandhills. "We're seeing more and more defense-related businesses looking our way," Ogden says.

With widening now complete on U.S. Highway 1 north of Southern Pines, distribution and logistics companies also would do well to consider the new park, says the railroad's Lewis.

For him, the cash value of the land at Ironhorse is less important than the hope that, rather than becoming yet another residential community, it can serve as an employment generator for Moore County.

"We are all realistic about our expectations," he says. "We need to bring jobs and investment to the county."

—Lawrence Bivins