



Company launches new bus at open house

Board members come to Jennings for opening

By **KIMBERLY DAVIS**

JENNINGS — The former Jennings High gym, now a showroom, was packed Saturday afternoon as people gathered around the door so they could hear about the new bus plant which has taken the school's place.

It was the long-awaited day for some Decatur County residents to see the construction inside their old school, meet the executive team of Bus and Coach International, see the firm's new bus and welcome the business to town.

The open house at Bus and Coach International, known as BCI, started at 2 p.m. and ended at 5 p.m. with over 200 people turning out.

The company purchased the old school in August and the building has been under renovation since. The first thing to go up was a large chain-link fence that enclosed the property. New BCI signs have decorated the outside of the building.

Inside, there is new dry wall. Rooms that once housed children are now the reception area and offices. The cafeteria is more modern, with tall tables and bright colors.

In the former gym, now the showroom, workers carefully preserved the Jennings Coyotes logo on the floor. The bleachers are still in place and so is the stage, but a large garage door has been added and the room houses a new 2007 BCI Falcon Motor Coach.

Before opening things up for questions and letting people climb in and out of the bus, Phil Oldridge, chief executive officer and president, talked a little about the business. BCI, said Mr. Oldridge, started as a company that sold and leased used coaches. A lot of the clients said they wished the firm was in the new bus business, he said. That started the wheels turning with a series of meetings and phone calls.

Mr. Oldridge said they knew it would be a long, drawn-out process, but the company decided to build a new bus. He said they wanted to build a U.S. bus with parts from the United States made to be used here. This bus, he said, pointing to the white bus with the red and orange design, is the prototype. This bus, he said, represents 3 1/2 years of our lives and a \$10.2 million investment.

All of this means a lot for Jennings and the area, said Mr. Oldridge. Already the firm has 20 buses presold. Most of the people who buy new buses have old ones to trade in, he said, and those need to be refurbished so they can be sold.

Refurbishing buses should add jobs here, he said.

The firm also has a transit bus, but the first one isn't here yet, he



At the open house at Bus and Coach International in Jennings on Saturday, Phil Oldridge, president and chief executive officer, told about 200 people a little bit about the company. — Telegram photos by Kimberly Davis

said. It probably will be a year or so before it arrives. In order to sell a transit bus in the United States, Mr. Oldridge added, 52 percent of the content has to be completed here. The firm would like to build a 20,000-square-foot facility out back, said Mr. Oldridge, and do that work here.

This new 2007 BCI Falcon Motor Coach, built in China to American standards and design, has been signed off and approved, he said. It is ready for sale.

This business in Jennings, said Mr. Oldridge, is a long-term project. This company is going to be here for a long time.

An important part of the business is accessibility to the community, he said, which means lengthening the airport runway in Oberlin. For parts disbursement, said Mr. Oldridge, that means getting parts to 48 states in 24 hours. The company can't make those turn arounds out of this location today, he said, because of the drive time.

Those parts needs are being met from other offices, he said, but they want to meet them from Jennings.

"This is our corporate office and headquarters," Mr. Oldridge added. "This is home, this is the place, this is where I want to be."

It is important to BCI to be able to get the parts and get people who want to come buy buses in and out

of here, he said.

An expansion at the airport will expand this community like there is no tomorrow, said Mr. Oldridge. Once BCI starts to move, businesses will be built around the headquarters.

The need is for an airport with a longer runway, he said. The company needs a facility to do transit sales and to ship parts from. BCI wants to do all of that from here, but it can't be done without someone in a truck driving 4/12 hours.

"We aren't here to ask for tax breaks or freebies," he said. "We

want to be part of the community and support the community.

"This is a fantastic location for us with people with a great education level."

Mr. Oldridge invited everyone to take a look at the bus, but asked them to remember it was a hand-made prototype, so there are a few dings in it. Anyone with questions for the board members was free to ask them, he said.

Once the building is finished, he added, the firm plans to have another open house. The audience gave Mr. Oldridge a standing ovation.



Oberlin resident Kevin Cooper looked at the back of the BCI Falcon 45 Motor Coach at the firm's open house in Jennings on Saturday.

Bus and Coach International launched the 2007 Falcon 45 Motor Coach Saturday in an open house in Jennings, with over 200 people from the area and executives and board members from all over.

At least 16 board members, executives and family members arrived in town last week from Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Pasadena, Calif., France and other places. During the open house Saturday, the BCI team talked with people, answering questions about the bus, the firm's new plant and themselves.

Included in the team, which sat on chairs lining the wall, were Phil Oldridge, president and chief executive officer; Larry Brennan, vice president and spokesman; Chuck Vanaveldt and Cathy Code, distributors; Brendan Riley, a business associate; Norm Freeman, a board member; Lee Gilroy, a board member, and his wife Alyson; Sally Shephard, David Elkaim and Natasha Vonflie, family members; Mark Rosenthal, national sales director; David Oldridge, national director of engineering and maintenance; Benny Yamagata and Chad Dixon, board members; and Lou Sardo president of Sardo Bus and Coach, a leading provider of interiors in the bus and coach industry.

One of the frequently asked questions was when the company would be hiring again. Mr. Brennan said that when the company does hire, they will be advertising in *The Oberlin Herald* and on their website www.bcibus.com, so people need to look in those places. He said he didn't have a date in mind.

Mr. Brennan said the open

house had been great.

"We were thrilled to have so many people from the community come out and show support," he said.

The next step for the company is the United Motorcoach Association Expo in New Orleans starting next week.

BCI is one of the sponsors. The company will have a strong presence there and will publicly unveil the new coach.

Phil Oldridge, chief executive officer and president, said he thought the open house had gone well. He said it was good to touch on some issues that are important to the community and the success of BCI.

Generally speaking, said Mr. Oldridge, he thinks the company has been well received here and hopefully he was able to answer some questions that people had about BCI.

Standing just behind the prototype bus, Mr. Oldridge said five more of the 2007 Falcon 45 coaches have arrived at the port of Long Beach. They will be taken to Las Vegas, given a final check, then sold and distributed from there.

Within the next 90 to 120 days, he said, the Jennings facility should be completed so they can start finishing buses here.

"My job," he said, "is to keep the company moving forward."

Mr. Oldridge, who lives in Pasadena, said he travels a lot for BCI. He said he has purchased 550 acres outside of Oberlin and plans to break ground for a home this summer.

He said he also bought a ranch near Dresden with his partner, Lee Gilroy, board member.

Mr. Brennan, vice president, has a home in Oberlin where he lives.



The business is housed in the former Jennings School, which it purchased last August.

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