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By: Kenny Burgamy

All aboard the new Nancy

My first memories of the Macon Terminal Station were riding with my family to take my older brother, Rusty, to meet his seventh-grade classmates for their school trip aboard the Nancy Hanks II as they made their way to our nation's capital.

Unfortunately, I never had the chance to ride "The Nancy" since passenger rail excursions to and from Macon ended April 30, 1971.

Not only did Central of Georgia Railway passenger train service fade in the '70s, so did major downtown retail outlets and their customers. The stores made the transition to the new regional mall on Eisenhower Parkway.

Today, 39-years later, positive changes are being made in downtown Macon and there's an increasing interest in providing rail service to a new generation.

If you haven't noticed, Macon is leading the state in the way of investment for commuter rail service. Honestly, it is past time to explore its potential.

Currently, Savannah is vying to become a cruise ship destination. The Port Planning Committee of Chatham County had their interest stimulated when Charleston, S.C., made the plunge. According to WTOG-TV in Savannah, the Charleston cruise terminal is expected to bring in \$40 million next year.

Mike Starr, president of Georgians for Passenger Rail, has proclaimed Macon the initial leg of a statewide rail network and with the news of Savannah and Charleston's expected cash surge via the cruise industry, it should whet Macon's appetite. We are poised to serve as a gateway between Savannah's seaport and Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport.

It occurs to me that state-of-the-art passenger rail service would play a significant part in the idea that Macon could one day be considered an “inland port,” as companies look for storage of excess cargo and containers here. Those business and civic leaders certainly could utilize the commuter rail to expedite their trips between the coast and Atlanta, avoiding escalating traffic counts on Interstate 75 and Interstate 16.

The recent Peyton Anderson Foundation challenge of \$250,000 for a passenger rail service exploration study has spurred a renewed interest in the transportation idea.

Our community, guided by Dr. Kirby Godsey and NewTown Macon, is in the process of matching \$250,000 to pay for the quantitative work. The railway organization’s study committee will soon be probing the costs of constructing the line between Macon and Atlanta.

The crucial element in their work will be determining how to make rail service self-sufficient. Personally, I think it is wise that any future commuter railroading projects have a viable self-sustaining fiscal plan so as to avoid future problems with the state coffers.

If there’s one thing our state and local elected officials should have learned from this bleak economic downturn is that ventures we begin should find a way to sustain themselves without total taxpayer support. At least that’s the argument we’re hearing about the halls of fame in Macon.

The caveat to that policy is the Georgia Dome. Some lawmakers are enamored with that “economic engine” and they’re making sure Arthur Blank and the Falcons don’t fly from the government-supported coop anytime soon. The dome is proof that not all initiatives in our state are created equal.

Bottom line, keeping the halls of fame open will be critical in creating an attractive environment around the vicinity of the Terminal.

It’s imperative that advocates for the passenger train idea find a way to develop plans for transportation centers at chief passenger rail points, such as Macon. Getting to your next destination easily with

the help of connecting rail, bus, taxi and/or rental cars, must be a major component in making the service a success.

I look forward to the day when we can make the trip to Atlanta in a cabin car without having interstate construction delays. I hope Georgia will find a way to get on board and not be the caboose on this project.

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