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On eve of mill's closure, Franklin takes stock

FRANKLIN

Tears were shed on that day last October, when International Paper announced that it would close a paper mill that has been a vital part of the region for more than a century.

But since then, the community has rallied, the 1,100 employees are mostly on their way to new beginnings, and local officials are waiting to hear what will happen to the huge mill in Isle of Wight County, just across the Blackwater River from Franklin.

Company officials have said there are about 15 offers to "re-purpose" the mill, said Phillip Bradshaw, chairman of the Isle of Wight County Board of Supervisors and a former mill employee himself.

Most of the companies considering the mill for potential re location are "green" industries, Bradshaw said at a community meeting Tuesday night at Paul D. Camp Community College

Franklin Mayor Jim Councill told the audience of about 75 that when the announcement was made last fall, it was understood that IP had no intention of selling or re using the mill, and it was clear that the paper mill would be taken out of the paper industry. IP wasn't going allow competition to mov e in, he said.

The mill will cease operations next week, officially on April 15, but it will continue to employ people at least through May.

"We know that we've done a really good job of hitting this thing head on," Councill said.

Bradshaw praised the state and federal government for their assistance.

Judy Begland, president and CEO of Opportunity Inc., a work-force development board, praised the union that has represented the employees over the years, employment agencies in Virginia and North Carolina, and community colleges in both states.

"We've had offers from volunteers to give haircuts for job interviews," she said. "Churches have called to see what they could do."

IP, Councill said, has "been working diligently" to find new tenants for the mill, which has its own energy plant.

"It's actually a sale," said Bradshaw. "IP is selling to another company, this could go on for 10 or 12 months. We've been very, very aggressive, very opportunistic. Now, it's a matter of time."

"The organization we've put together has turned the tide," Councill said.

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