

'Rails To Trails' Could Be Derailed By Buyer

By Mark Linder
County may have put
railroad on wrong track.

The old railroad line between Travelers Rest and Greenville may have been put on the wrong track by a majority of the Greenville County Council. That's because at least \$4,630,000 has been spent on the "Swamp Rabbit" with virtually nothing to show for it, except lots of red ink.

The numbers start with \$1,300,000 Greenville County paid RailTex for the old rail line, which RailTex bought for only \$500,000. However, before RailTex sold it to Greenville County for an obvious profit of \$800,000, RailTex sold off all the railroad's assets, including its two small diesel engines and all its freight cars.

With taxpayers' dollars Greenville County bought a railroad that was going nowhere.

Greenville County Councilman Joe Dill, whose District No. 17 used to include most of the old railroad, said he was opposed

to paying \$1,300,000 for the railroad when the purchase was originally made.

"I voted against it," said Dill, "because I thought we were paying too much for it. I thought we could have bought it for only about \$500,000. I couldn't rationalize that large expenditure."

The vote was close, 7-to-5 to pay \$1,300,000 for the old railroad. Dill was one of the five who voted against it.

"What we ended up buying was really just a right-of-way," said Dill.

Also voting against it was County Councilman Mark Kingsbury, whose District No. 19 now includes the old rail line. That occurred after the respective council district lines were redrawn.

Like Dill, Kingsbury

thought a better price for the railroad was approximately \$500,000.

"We tried to convince the other council members that \$1,300,000 was too much to pay," said Kingsbury, "but we could not prevail."

To add insult to apparent injury, on June 24, 2005, the Greenville County Economic Development Corp. filed with the Surface Transportation Board of the Dept. of Transportation a petition to abandon approximately 11.8 miles of the rail line. These 11.8 miles (Northern Segment) extend from milepost 0.0 in Greenville to milepost 11.8 in T.R. The petition also includes discontinuing rail service over 3.29 miles of a line extending from milepost AJK 585.34 in East Greenville to milepost AJK



The old rail line from Greenville to TR may be bought by a private investor and put back in service. Section pictured here is near the old Scotts fertilizer plant. Photo by W. Bettis

588.63 in Greenville (Southern Segment).

The Northern Segment traverses U.S. Postal Service zip codes 29690, 29609, 29613, 29617, 29611, and 29601. The Southern Seg-

ment traverses U.S. Postal Service zip code 29607. A final decision on this matter from the Surface Transportation Board will be issued by Oct. 12, 2005. STB decisions and notices are available at WWW.STB.DOT.GOV.

Besides \$1,300,000 being spent to buy the "Swamp Rabbit," between \$980,000 and \$1,000,000 was spent by Greenville County for new track. Another \$700,000 was spent on egress fees that

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are also called "F.L.O.T." fees, which stands for Fees in Lieu of Taxes. This \$700,000 immediately went to the Federal Government.

On top of that, \$100,000 was spent for a SC Dept. of Transportation study of the old rail line. Plus \$50,000 was also spent on a trestle study, which showed the county would have to spend \$1,500,000 for a new trestle. That money has been budgeted, but so far no new trestle has been built.

Greenville County now owns a non-operational railroad, which under federal law is supposed to be operating. However, if the county is unable to operate the rail line successfully, it is obligated under that same federal law to find a new owner who

can operate the rail line.

On July 15, 2005, the Western Carolina Railway Service Corp. filed a notice with the STB expressing interest in buying the "Swamp Rabbit." In a recent press release, Western Carolina's president Steven C. Hawkins said he is working to secure enough private money to purchase the rail line and restore service to it. Hawkins has 60 days to act on the notice. So it is not known presently just how much his offer will be to purchase the "Swamp Rabbit," and if the county can either make a profit or break even on the \$4,630,000 expenditure of taxpayers' money.

A Greenville native and graduate of Eastside High School, Hawkins has 15 years' experience working

in the railway business. This includes working in both labor and management for both RailTex and Norfolk & Southern.

The problems actually go back as far as Dec. 1997, when the then new owners of the line, RailTex, filed a petition to end service on the line, also an apparent violation of federal law. This is according to T.R. businessman Lee K. Groome, president of Groome & Associates. Groome operated a bulk paper service that was forced to cut 24 jobs and whose sales fell by 70-percent, once the "Swamp Rabbit" quit operating.

Another business, which also used the "Swamp Rabbit" as a carrier, was forced to close once the rail line was shut down, even though federal law said it should still be running. All this occurred by the year 2000. So now five years later the "Swamp Rabbit" is not running, two businesses have closed, and numbers of jobs in Travelers Rest were lost.

It is no secret that if the rail line is to become operational again, restoration work must be done on both the rails and the cross ties in order to operate similar small diesel engines and freight cars that once could be seen moving at five to eight miles per hour along the historic railroad.

If Western Carolina Railway president Steven C.

Hawkins makes Greenville County an offer it can't refuse, it is inestimable at this point as to how soon the rail service would resume. That is primarily because of the required work needed on the rails, cross ties, and trestles to make certain a train could safely operate again.

At this point, no one knows how long the rebuilding work would take or how much it would cost. That is because no rail expert has been called in to appraise the rail line and give a reliable estimate of the cost. Some well-meaning people have guessed the cost to be as low as \$500,000, while others have guessed the cost to be as much as \$1,500,000. However, at this point these are just guesses. No one knows for sure.

No matter how well meaning these guesses are, they also do not include the cost of re-equipping the rail line with at least two small diesel engines and enough freight cars to carry the various, respective loads.

At this point, Greenville County taxpayers still own a railroad that does not operate but which is supposed to run by federal edict.

Kingsbury concluded, "We can't go back and change what happened. Nevertheless, the railroad is still a valuable asset. So let's use it as a bike path and walking trail so people can enjoy all the beautiful property."