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Rail-to-trail update

The corridor's future remains uncertain

By Justin Chappell

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A 12-mile length of defunct railroad tracks that connects downtown Greenville and Travelers Rest has been considered for some heavy duty recycling.

Upstate Forever, a group that tries to protect what it sees as special places, hopes to turn the rails into trails.

Last summer, volunteers from Upstate Forever cleaned up a section of the tracks to show how it could be refurbished into a walkable and bikeable greenway.

But a major federal decision regarding the old railway will cloud the rail line's fate until Feb. 14.

Negotiations have been going on between its publicly controlled owner, Greenville County Economic Development Corp., and an interested buyer, Western Carolina Railway Service Corp.

But public opinion as to whether a walking and bike riding connector should be there would be irrelevant if the rail sells to the private buyer.

There'd be no legal obligation for that buyer to do anything trail related. That'd be like your neighbor demanding that you build a fountain in your front yard because they thought it'd be nice.

The guy who's president of the interested company, Steven Hawkins, has said that his company's ownership wouldn't end any trail possibilities.

"WCRS is not opposed to working with the community to provide the needed right-of-way for the proposed trail, coexistent with a reactivated rail line," he wrote in an e-mail. "WCRS has also considered the possibility of providing a tourist rail operation (near-term) or eventually commuter rail service (long-term) on the corridor."

He's offering roughly \$46,000 for the property that the county bought for about \$1.4 million in taxpayer money in the late '90s, said Andrew J. White, the development corp.'s lawyer in the negotiations.

Upstate Forever chairman Carlton Owen says giving up public ownership is a huge mistake because that corridor is a major-area connector that could be turned into all sorts of things that'd benefit the public more than an occasionally running rail line that serves a few local companies.

It's important to know that the federal agency that oversees this stuff, the Surface Transportation Board, is supposed to, by law, try to restore rail service when there's interest in doing so.

That means a rail-related party can "force" an owner into negotiations just because it expresses interest and intent on restoring the rail to service.

There's nothing shady about it - it's all legal.

But those rules, Owen says, are "grossly outdated" and don't guide decisions for the general public good.

While Owen and Upstate Forever aren't part of the legal negotiations going on right now, he says he's taking the feedback he's getting from the public and passing it along for consideration to the two groups in negotiations.

"I will simply state that both sides are approaching the matter open-mindedly," Hawkins said, "with a willingness to seek a solution that can be beneficial to all interests."

Owen is skeptical of a renewed rail line being financially viable, saying that the section has failed numerous times before. Hawkins, however, says he can make a go of both - rail and trail - and keep the line running and from returning to ruin.

It'll all be figured out by February, but until then, Hawkins says the trail is still a possibility.

"I have repeatedly stated to persons with an interest in having a trail," he said, "that the two can quite peaceably co-exist."

What's next?

Negotiations continue on whether the 12 miles of train track that was previously considered for a hiking/biking trail will be sold to a private rail company that plans on restoring rail service.

The two parties must find an agreement by February or the federal agency will make its own terms.

Here are the three most likely outcomes:

1. An agreement is reached, and Western Carolina Railway Service Corp. owns the line.
2. The federal agency sets the terms, and the rail company accepts and owns the lines.
3. The federal agency sets the terms, and the rail company does not accept and the line is kept by Greenville County Economic Development Corp.

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