

County may lease railroad to entrepreneur

Negotiations underway to beat Feb. 14 deadline

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Greenville County may soon agree to lease its abandoned railroad to the man who wants to buy it.

Steven Hawkins, president of Western Carolina Railway Service Corp., says he is negotiating an agreement with the Greenville County Economic Development Corporation that owns and manages the rail line.

If successful, the corporation will lease the 11.8 miles of track between Greenville and Travelers Rest to Western Carolina for perhaps as little as \$1 per year. In return, Hawkins will agree to repair, maintain and operate the line for shippers it serves and cooperate in a walking trail Upstate For-

ever wants to develop along the line.

Hawkins, who has 15 years experience in the rail industry, called it a "great likelihood" an agreement can be reached.

"If something can come out of this that benefits all the stakeholders, it would be ideal," said Greenville County Council Chairman Butch Kirven who also chairs the corporation's board.

Both parties are working to meet a U.S. Surface Transportation Board deadline of Feb. 14 to complete negotiations.

During a stakeholders meeting this week, it was announced Paper Cutters, a former shipper on the line, is Western Carolina's principal investor. Hawkins said Paper Cutters needs service so it can expand its plant.

Hawkins applied to the Surface Transportation Board to purchase the railroad after the corporation filed to abandon it last year. Upstate Forever had also expressed an interest in using the rail right-of-way to develop a trail that follows the Reedy River,

linking Greenville with Travelers Rest.

But Surface Transportation Board rules require the corporation to first entertain offers to buy the railroad from responsible parties.

Greenville County purchased the railroad, along with another 3.29 miles of track to the south, in 1999 for \$1.3 million in order to preserve it for future rail service. The line hasn't operated since 1998 and most of its shippers have closed.

Hawkins said he sees an opportunity to restore service and attract new customers.

But he estimates it will cost \$5 million.

The two parties had been unable to negotiate a sales price. The corporation originally asked \$1.7 million, while Hawkins said the railroad is only worth \$46,278.

He proposed the lease to break the impasse by creating a win/win scenario.

Should negotiations break down, either party could ask the Surface Transportation Board to step in and set a sales price.