

Making a Paladin connection

Investor calls Furman's Shi a catalyst behind rail negotiations

BY GARY HYNDMAN
staff writer

A Furman University connection may have spurred a compromise proposal to operate both a railroad and a public trail on a Greenville County rail line.

Travelers Rest businessman Randy Mathena said he attended a luncheon on the Furman campus last fall where Furman President David Shi encouraged stakeholders to create a win/win situation. Mathena said Shi's willingness to get involved lent credibility to an Upstate Forever proposal to build a hiking trail on the county's abandoned 11.8-mile railroad between Greenville and Travelers Rest.

Shi couldn't be reached for comment.

Mathena is a Furman graduate who attended Furman at roughly the same time as Shi, though the two men didn't know each other. He owns Paper Cutters near the Furman campus and is the principal investor backing Western Carolina Railway Service Corp.'s effort to purchase and operate the line presently owned by the Greenville County Economic Development Corporation.

But the two parties have been stale-

mated. The county asked \$1.7 million for a railroad that Western Carolina President Steven Hawkins says is worth \$46,278. The U.S. Surface Transportation Board, which oversees all rail transactions, has given them until Feb. 14 to reach an agreement.

As reported in the *Greenville Journal*, relations recently warmed after Hawkins proposed the economic development corporation lease him the rail line for a modest sum. In return, he would raise the estimated \$5 million needed to restore full service to the line and cooperate with Upstate Forever to build the trail.

Greenville County purchased the northern and a shorter southern line for \$1.3 million in 1999 to preserve them for future rail service. But the northern line has been without service since early 1998, and most of its shippers have closed.

The economic development corporation, which owns and maintains the line for the county, along with Furman, Upstate Forever and other interested parties, proposed turning the corridor into

a trail under the Rails to Trails program. Their goal is to improve public access to the river and spur economic activity. Volunteer crews worked last summer clearing brush from the track and plans were made to salvage track materials to pay



LINEMAN: Local businessman, Randy Mathena, is the principal investor behind a plan to purchase an abandoned rail line from Greenville County.

the cost of building the trail.

But the project has been on hold since Hawkins surfaced last year with a viable offer. Surface Transportation Board rules give priority to maintaining rail service on existing railroads.

Mathena's financial backing has made Hawkins a player in negotiations. The Logan, W.Va., native has operated his paper business since 1981. He presently >>

>> has two plants in Greenville County, employing 50 people and doing between \$8 million and \$10 million in sales annually.

After the previous owner discontinued rail service, Mathena resorted to having materials delivered by rail to a Greenville warehouse and shipped by truck to his plant, increasing the cost of doing business.

In addition to reducing his shipping costs, he wants rail service restored before building a new 40,000 square foot warehouse adjacent to the line.

He agreed to meet with Hawkins last fall and found him "very skilled, organized and detailed, with a heart-felt interest in railroads." The two men are gambling other businesses will be drawn to the corridor if rail service is restored.

But Mathena is also a man whose heart remains with his alma mater.

So, when the Furman president called, he listened. Today, his goals for the corridor are commercial transportation, the public greenway and commuter rail service between Greenville and Travelers Rest.

"The program can't be truly successful without all three goals being met," he said.

But Greenville County Council Chairman Butch Kirven, who also chairs the economic development corporation, says an agreement isn't imminent.

"This Feb. 14 date should not be seen as the date by when all questions will be answered," he said.

Either party can ask the Surface



Julie Turner/Staff

CURRENTLY CLOSED: This Greenville County-owned rail line has been out of service since 1998.

Transportation Board to set a sales price if they haven't reached an agreement by that date. Kirven expects the proposed sale to play itself out before negotiations over a lease resume.

Carlton Owen, an Upstate Forever board member, said the outright sale of the railroad would make a trail less likely. Restored rail service would also scuttle plans to use salvaged materials to pay for the trail. In addition, engineering and right-of-way issues remain to be resolved before a trail can be placed next to an active rail line.

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