

# Price for rail line set at \$738,000

March 27 is deadline for buyer's decision

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The U.S. Surface Transportation Board has ordered Greenville County Economic Development Corp. to sell its railroad to Western Carolina Railway Service Corp. for \$738,000.

Western Carolina President Steven

Hawkins had offered to pay \$46,268 for the 11.8-mile stretch of abandoned rail between Greenville and Travelers Rest known as the Greenville & Northern Railroad. The county's corporation was asking \$1.1 million.

"We've been secure in our position," said Greenville County Council Chairman Butch Kirven, who also chairs the corporation's board. "So we were not surprised by the STB's ruling."

Hawkins, however, declined to comment, saying he was still meeting with

advisors to determine his next course of action. By transportation board rules, he has until March 27 to accept the purchase price.

If he declines, the corporation will be free to proceed with plans to allow Upstate Forever to develop a public trail on the right-of-way under the Rails to Trails program.

"We would love to see a trail as an interim use," Kirven said.

The corporation was formed to own and manage the line, along with another

3.29-mile rail corridor to the south that Greenville County purchased in 1999 for \$1.3 million. From the outset, the county's objective was to preserve the two corridors for future commuter rail service.

Legal abandonment of the Greenville & Northern, which the corporation applied for and received from the transportation board last year, accomplishes that objective.

The transportation board is a federal agency with regulatory responsibility over the rail industry. >

> Its ruling pivoted on ownership of the rail right-of-way. Hawkins said his research showed most of the property was in easements rather than fee simple deeds.

But the transportation board sided with the county's corporation, saying Hawkins didn't meet its burden of proof to counter the corporation's claim that it owns nearly 44 acres of land out of a total 57.6 acres along the corridor. The board accepted the corporation's appraisal that the land's fair market value is \$738,000.

It denied the corporation any compensation for the track materials, agreeing with Hawkins their liquidation value was less than the cost to remove them.

Hawkins response to the board's decision will determine whether he fulfills a lifelong dream to own a railroad.

He found an investor, Randy Mathena, a Travelers Rest businessman who was once a shipper on the line. Last fall they made an Offer of Financial Assistance to purchase the abandoned line that the corporation is legally bound to entertain.

The line has been out of service since early 1998 and most of its former shippers have closed their businesses or relocated. Hawkins estimated it will ultimately cost \$5 million to make necessary repairs. He planned to recruit new shippers to locate on the line with the understanding service would be fully restored.

Kirven said the corporation's board would still be willing to consider a lease arrangement with Hawkins. It was after earlier negotiations for Hawkins to either lease or purchase the rail line broke down that the matter was referred to the transportation board for binding arbitration.

But Kirven said his preference is to establish either passenger or commuter service on the rail corridor. Such service would be more compatible with an area he said is in transition from industrial to residential uses.

There is currently a proposal for rezoning of a nearby 16-acre parcel off Hampton Avenue Extension to allow for the construction of an apartment complex.

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