

=====
Legal fight stalls plan to turn rails into hiking trails
=====

Greenville News, The (SC)-December 9, 2004

Author: The Greenville News= Final, Paul Alongi, Staff

County taxpayers wait for return on 1999 deal

By Paul Alongi

STAFF_WRITER

palongi@greenvillenews.com

You won't find sidewalks on much of Poinsett Highway, so you probably will drive the next time you travel between Greenville and Travelers Rest.

Someday, you might be able to walk, ride a bike or take a train.

The main barrier is legal wrangling that has bogged down plans to turn 11 miles of rusty railroad into a smooth path that would cross Furman University and the Reedy River.

Furman junior Ian Calhoun, who travels around campus on a mountain bike, said students would ride downtown on the path and families would use it for outings.

"If it's a scenic drive -- absolutely," he said.

Trees and weeds have taken over the rail bed since Greenville County taxpayers bought the line for \$1.3 million in 1999. Ideas for converting the line have been kicked around, but not so much as a cost study has gone forward.

County Council Chairwoman Phyllis Henderson said the reasons are legal challenges

and opposition from the business community.

The legal saga of Lee K. Groome has been a factor.

Groome, who owns a wholesale paper converting business along the tracks, contended that Groome & Associates was hurt because rail service ceased, according to court documents.

Judge John Few dismissed Groome's 13th Circuit Court lawsuit in September. He said the business had trouble for other reasons, including a national economic recession in 2000.

Groome now has filed a complaint with the Surface Transportation Board, a federal regulatory agency.

His Washington, D.C.-based attorney, Richard H. Streeter, said Groome wants about four miles of line re-opened to link his business to CSX and Norfolk Southern tracks.

"If he can do that, he can have rail service," Streeter said.

Greenville County Economic Development Corp., a nonprofit agency formed by the County Council to buy the railroad, has estimated it would cost about \$8 million to restore the entire line.

As the wrangling continues, Furman University President David Shi has dreamed about what could be while watching the rail bed deteriorate.

If a trail were built, Furman students would be able to head north to Travelers Rest or go south to the Peace Center for the Performing Arts and other downtown Greenville attractions, Shi said.

Furman freshman Eliot Paschalis said, "I think it would be a good idea if it's an unused railroad track. To make it into a bike path would make sense."

Shi said light rail service would be an attractive possibility in the distant future, but the population density in the Travelers Rest area remains below the threshold for passenger traffic.

In the meantime, Shi said he has talked with civic officials about removing the rail line and wooden ties to turn the rail bed into a trail. Another possibility is laying an asphalt surface and starting a rubber-tire tram.

"We're still at a very early stage of this," Shi said. "The next major stage would be to commission an engineering study that would develop a detailed plan for the entire route."

The tracks go from just north of Travelers Rest to downtown Greenville's Linky Stone Park, crossing and following the Reedy River along the way.

Most of the rail line has enough room to start a train service and lay a path for walkers

and bicyclists, although the path may need to detour away from the line in some areas, said Diane Eldridge, Upstate Forever's director of education and advocacy.

"We're in the business of promoting opportunities for people to get out and get from one place to another without having to get in a car to do it," she said. "And that rail line provides that opportunity."

Henderson said the corporation has held off studying the railroad's potential but has completed a title search to see where the corridor is.

"About the time that was finished, the lawsuit started," said Henderson, a member of the corporation's board.

Groome contended that the lack of rail service increased storage, handling and shipping costs by \$285,243, according to court documents.

When Few dismissed the case, he wrote that Groome's sales had begun a downward trend before rail service ceased in February 1998. Other "business reversals" included a general decline in the paper business connected with the 2000 recession, Few wrote.

Streeter said he believes the Surface Transportation Board will consider issues that Few didn't and that the judge was wrong about Groome's business.

Streeter said Groome's food and pharmaceutical paper products are "essentially recession-proof."

The fate of the railroad now falls to a federal regulatory agency overseen by three commissioners -- two Republicans and a Democrat.

Attorneys for Groome and the Greenville County Development Corp. are scheduled to file papers through January.

Meanwhile, hikers and bicyclists will have to wait to see if the line will be converted.

Thomas Day, a Furman senior, won't see a trail open before he graduates. He said he would have used the path for hiking.

"It would add another outdoor attraction to Furman," Day said. "Furman is already an outdoor park for the city."

'Paul Alongi can be reached at 298-4746.

VOICES

"I think it's a great idea. It promotes physical activity." -- Sarah Garden, Furman student

"I think it would be a good idea if it's an unused railroad track. To make it into a bike path would make sense." -- Eliot Paschalis, Furman student