

Public trail system is a go

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Plans also call for tram service

BY GARY HYNDMAN

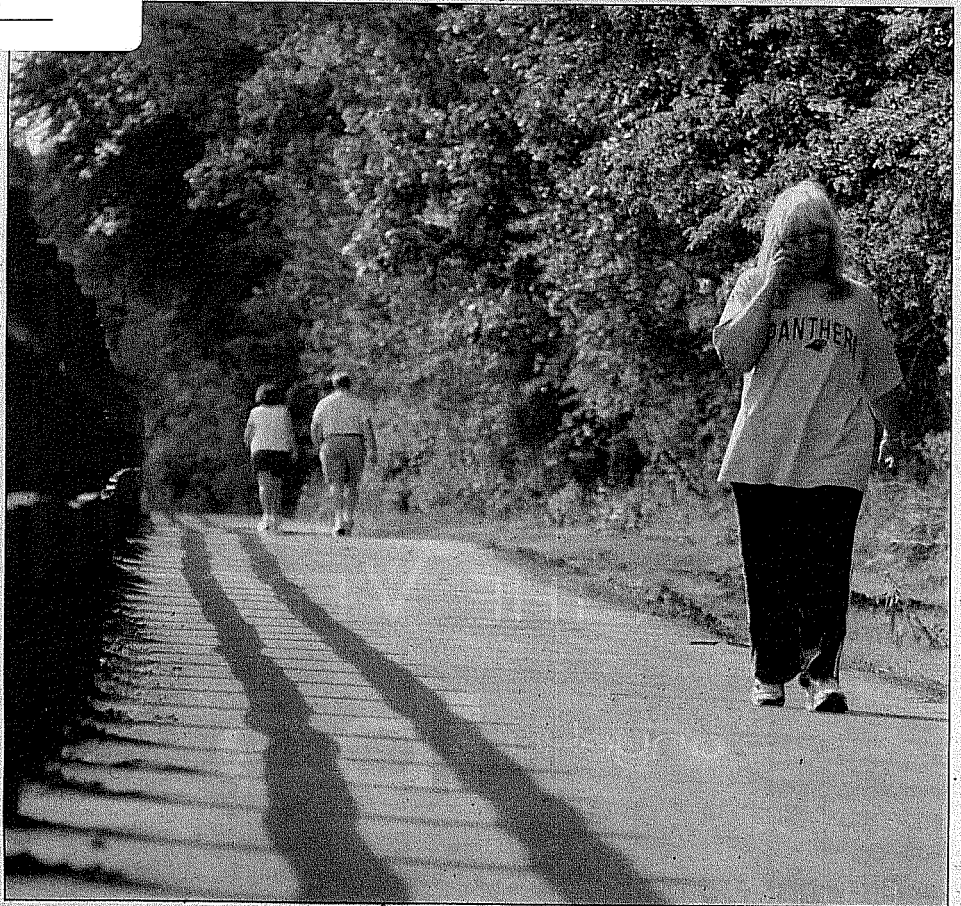
staff writer

A long-anticipated public trail along the Reedy River connecting Greenville to Travelers Rest has taken a major step forward.

The Greenville County Economic Development Corp. voted 5-0 to back a tram-trail for the 11.8 miles of abandoned rail corridor known as the Greenville & Northern Railroad. The plan is endorsed by a consortium of groups, including the cities of Greenville and Travelers Rest, the Greenville County Recreation District, Furman University and Upstate Forever.

"I think everyone realized this was the right thing to do," said Greenville County Council Chairman Butch Kirven, who also chairs the corporation's board.

The plan, as conceived by Carlton Owen, an Upstate Forever board member, calls for three phases of development that begins with removal of rails and ties and concludes with eventual bus or commuter rail service. It's consistent with previous studies that >



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STROLLING: Greenville County residents listed walking as one of their favorite recreational activities in a county-sponsored survey.

> recommended a public greenway to link the two cities.

Owen told Greenville County Council recently he believes it's possible to complete phase one, a nine-mile gravel bike and hiking trail, by the end of the year.

The vote by the corporation's board brings to an end many months of uncertainty over the future of the rail corridor purchased, along with another shorter line, in 1999 by Greenville County for \$1.3 million. The county's goal was to preserve the rights-of-way for future rail service.

After the corporation asked the U.S. Surface Transportation Board to abandon the line last year, Western Carolina Railway Service Corp. filed to purchase it and restore freight service. The transportation board ordered the corporation to sell it to the railroad company for \$738,000.

But the transportation board refused the company's request the corporation be required to guarantee its ownership of the rail right-of-way that Western Carolina President Steven Hawkins said he needed to secure financing.

In voting for the trail, the corporation's board rejected a proposal by Hawkins for a long term lease of the line.

Turning the rail line into a trail is permitted under federal rail banking legislation. It includes the stipulation rail service may be restored at a later date.

That's fine with backers of the project who envision light rail commuter train service running between the two communities, with a stop at the Furman campus.

"This is going to be very important to our downtown revitalization effort," said Travelers Rest Mayor Roy Reynolds to County Council.

The corporation now has until Oct. 2 to have an operations agreement approved by the transportation board. Owen said the recreation district that operates the county's parks

system will likely operate the trail. But no agreement has yet been reached, said Kirven.

Gene Smith, the recreation district's executive director, said his organization is agreeable to operating the trail and would absorb the \$15,000 to \$25,000 annual cost into its budget.

"We don't really have the money to be taking on something else," he said. "It is a bit of a leap of faith."

Most of the cost would involve mowing and controlling vegetation, he said.

Owen has proposed the first phase of the project be paid for with some of the proceeds from salvaging the line's rails and ties. An independent appraisal paid for by the corporation determined the salvage operation would net \$400,000, he said.

Under his proposal, half of it would be used for trail development and the other half to pay off the corporation's legal fees associated with abandoning the line.

But the appraisal conflicts with numbers Hawkins submitted with his filing to purchase the line. He calculated the salvage operations would cost more than the materials are worth.

"Is Hawkins right or is the independent guy right?" said Owen. "We'll have to find out."

After the operations agreement is approved and an intergovernmental agreement signed by participating parties, bids would go out for the salvage operations.

Phase two proposes a paved surface eight to ten feet wide that would be used by pedestrians, cyclists and a mini-bus that would carry passengers for a small fare. Owen estimated the project would cost about \$2 million, 80 percent of it paid for by a federal grant.

The 20 passenger, rubber-tired mini-bus is built in Europe and runs on a combination of electric power and biodiesel fuel.

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**GENE SMITH,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
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