



Carlton Owen

In this column, we take a look at Vision 2025, a plan for the development of Greenville's future. This month, the topic is the Rails-to-Trails project, with questions answered by Carlton Owen.

had to address a long-running legal challenge filed by a former rail customer. The inability to find funds to put the line back in service and the diversion of having to address legal challenges has occupied the GCEDC for several years.

While the legal challenge appears to have been settled, other issues remain. The GCEDC has filed for formal "abandonment" of the GNRR and for suspension of service on the shorter line. One party has stepped forward seeking to potentially buy the line with plans to put it back into commercial service. The U.S. Department of Transportation's Surface Transportation Board must rule on both requests – purchase and abandonment. A decision is expected in the fall.

In the spring of 2005, the GCEDC granted a group of interested organizations working under the auspices of the city of Travelers Rest permission to clear the line of more than a decade's bounty of weeds, vines and trees. To date, more than 2,200 work hours have resulted in making the first pass at clearing the entire line. The remainder should be cleared within the next couple of weeks. But for the assistance of a dedicated crew of volunteers from the Greenville County Detention Center, such progress would have been impossible.

While the volunteer organizations understand that the Surface Transportation Board and GCEDC could decide to restore commercial service, the group is unanimous in their belief that "interim" trail use is the highest and best use of this outstanding asset. Too, such use protects the corridor through a federal provision entitled "railbanking" that would ensure that should future circumstances warrant, rail service could be restored.

THE Vision's Voice RAILS-TO-TRAILS

by Becky Mann
presented by The Cliffs Communities

Becky Mann: What is the nationwide rails-to-trails effort?

Carlton Owen: Rails-to-trails is shorthand for turning abandoned railroad rights-of-ways into hiking, walking or biking trails. From just a few minor stretches in the early 1980s the movement has captured the imagination of communities across the country. Today, more than 13,000 miles of former rail lines serve as active trails.

BM: How and when did Greenville first become interested in being part of it?

CO: Greenville County, through the Greenville County Economic Development Corporation (GCEDC), stepped up to buy two out-of-service rail lines in June 1999. One, the 11.8 mile corridor Greenville and Northern Railroad (GNRR), runs from downtown Greenville to north of Travelers Rest. The other, a 3.2-mile segment, runs from Woodruff Road, across Verdae to I-85. The county purchased the lines in hopes of re-establishing rail service and to preserve the corridors for potential future uses (e.g. commuter rail). Several people came forward at that time to point out the benefits of considering the longer GNRR as a possible rail-to-trail conversion.

BM: What is the status of the effort?

CO: GCEDC has conducted a number of reviews and has

BM: What is your involvement with Rails to Trails?

CO: As an avid walker, I have used a number of rail trails across the country. Before moving to Greenville, we lived in the Washington, D.C., area for five years.

There are a number of outstanding rail-trails there that get unbelievable public use.

In late 2003, I had the privilege of working with a client in Greenville who owned land adjacent to the GNRR corridor. After hacking my way up the entire corridor with one of the staff members of Upstate Forever, I became convinced that the line was an outstanding asset that most folks just couldn't visualize. Helping others see the potential and making this asset available for future generations has become one of my passions.

BM: Who else is involved?

CO: While I've been an advocate for the project for more than two years and most recently have been leading the volunteer effort to clear the line, many others have been involved. Among them are the city of Travelers Rest (led by City Manager Dianna Gracle and Mayor Roy Reynolds), Furman University and President Dr. David Shi, Palmetto Conservation Foundation, Upstate Forever, and literally dozens of volunteers who have given from one to dozens of hours in sweat equity under harsh summer conditions.

BM: What's your ultimate goal?

CO: Our ultimate goal would be to have the 11.8-mile corridor paved and widely accessible for public hiking/walking and biking. Perhaps such could be possible in as little as 2-5 years.

BM: How does this particular project fit into Vision 2025?

CO: Perhaps a sentence taken from the Vision 2025 "Vision Summary" says it best, "Using the gardens, footbridge and sculpture at the Reedy River Falls Park as a centerpiece, the entire 16-mile greenway

along the Reedy River between Lake Conestee and Furman has been completed."

The proposed "Carolina Swamp Rabbit Rail/Tram/Trail" offers the potential to link major new features along the Reedy River in downtown Greenville to the re-emerging Monaghan Village, Furman University and Travelers Rest. Imagine a day trip that begins with coffee at the new Conestee Lake Park, followed by viewing flowers at Falls Park and the Children's Garden, an afternoon picnic at Furman Lake and an ice cream cone in Travelers Rest all rounded out with a pleasant bike ride back through forests, rock cuts and a swamp. That and much more is what the Swamp Rabbit Trail offers. ■

Carlton Owen has called the Upstate home since 1990. A forester and wildlife biologist, he operates a consulting practice, The Environmental Edge, LLC, from his soon-to-be one-of-a-kind green certified home and office in the Pettigru Historic District. A member of the Board of Directors of Upstate Forever since its creation, he is currently serving his second term as Chairman.



As Vision 2005 paved the way in the 1980s for the incredible quality of life Greenville enjoys today, Vision 2025 spearheads projects that will further elevate our city, culturally and commercially. The Vision's Voice is one of the many ways that The Cliffs is committed to promoting growth in Greenville.

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