Pickens Doodle Rails to Trails gaining steam

By Lisa Hallo and Julian A. Reed

GUEST COLUMN





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The Greenville Hospital System Swamp Rabbit Trail had more than 350,000 users in its first year of operation, and nearby businesses reported revenue or sales increases of 30 to 85 percent, according to a Furman University study released earlier this year by Upstate Forever and the Greenville County Recreation District with funding through the Environmental Protection Agency, Furman University, Bikes Belong, and the Greenville Pickens Area Transportation Study. Pickens County now has the opportunity to bring the same positive health, economic and environmental impacts of a rail-trail conversion to its citizens.

The Pickens Doodle line is an 8.5-mile rail line between Easley and Pickens perfectly suited for a trail providing recreation and transportation opportunities connecting these two population centers. Since there is no turnaround at the Pickens end on the rail line, it was necessary for trains to run backwards in one direction. This reminded onlookers of a doodlebug, and the name stuck.

The line's current owner, Pickens Railway Company, has it on the market for $500,000, and the cities of Easley and Pickens have both expressed strong interest in contributing toward the purchase of the line in hopes of converting it to a public-use trail.

Public interest in the project is sky-high. A survey of Pickens County YMCA members found that a whopping 84 percent "support the use of public tax dollars to purchase the Doodle Railroad for a rails-to-trails project," and another 12 percent support the project using only private dollars. Half of respondents even expressed a willingness to contribute their own money toward the project.

The Greater Easley Chamber of Commerce conducted a similar survey of its members, and 90 percent support "city and county leaders working together to purchase the property for the sole purpose of developing a hiking/biking trail," as reported in the *Easley Progress*. *The Greenville News* has applauded the cities of Easley and Pickens for their efforts advancing the project thus far. Even the Pickens Railway Company, in a filing with the Surface Transportation Board (STB), stated that the right-of-way "is a good candidate for a recreational trail" and that the downtown businesses in Pickens and Easley "would benefit from the use of the Subject Line as a trail."

Amidst overwhelming support for the project, there are a few vocal naysayers who claim that a conversion of the Doodle line to a public use trail violates the property rights of the landowners along the line.

Based on cases involving other rail-trail conversions, including a 2009 case in nearby Newberry County, a judge is unlikely to agree. The law clearly states that conversion of a rail line to trail use does not constitute abandonment of the right-of-way. Such interim trail use preserves the line for future rail activation, and STB retains jurisdiction.

Luckily for adjacent property owners, real estate values often increase when a public use trail is constructed nearby. In Mecklenburg County, N.C., real estate increased in value by $3,200 within 5,000 feet of the greenway trail. Similarly, a recent study in Ohio suggested single-family residential property values increase by $7.05 every foot closer the property is located to the Little Miami Scenic Greenway trail. A survey of 2,000 homebuyers, conducted by the National Association of Homebuilders and National Association of Realtors, indicated that walking/jogging and bike trails rank "important to very important," behind only highway access.

Rail-trail conversions can be funded through a variety of sources ranging from federal transportation dollars to private/public partnerships (e.g., Greenville Hospital System sponsoring the Swamp Rabbit Trail) to grant funds and individual donation campaigns. In the case of the Doodle line, both the cities of Easley and Pickens have a hospitality tax that could support the purchase and maintenance of the line or simply provide the necessary local match for federal funding offered through sources such as the current transportation legislation known as "Map-21." Though Map-21 offered each state the opportunity to opt out of recreational trail funding, Gov. Nikki Haley wisely chose participate in this program.

The opportunity that stands before Pickens County — to convert an unutilized and neglected rail corridor into a public use trail that would benefit area residents and promote economic growth — is one that cannot be missed. For more information and updates on this project, see www.facebook.com/PickensCounty-Doodle.