

**Tuesday, August 1, 2006, Sierra Vista Herald**?Last modified Tuesday, August 1, 2006 3:44 AM MDT

**Business group still tries for rail line ? ?**By Karen Weil

Herald/Review??BISBEE—The man representing a group of investors said they are still in play when it comes to possibly purchasing a rail line running from Paul Spur to Benson —despite a recent federal decision.

Charles Sotelo, president of the Sonora-Arizona International Corp., said Monday that he is aware of the decision by the U.S. Surface Transportation Board. ??

Sotelo said the investors Òstill have a lender in San Francisco trying to contact them.Ó??

According to its Web site, last week the board approved the abandonment of lines owned by the San Pedro Railroad Operating Co.??

The STB also reopened the proceeding by granting the Sonora-Arizona group's withdrawal of its financial offer.??

That opens doors to the possibility of a nature trail in place of a railroad.??

Another group negotiating with the San Pedro Railroad Operating Co., Trust for Public Lands, now has until Jan. 7, 2007, to negotiate for the rail line, according to the STB.??

Michael Patrick, project manager with the non-profit Trust for Public Lands said they will begin negotiations with the railroad company.

??ÒWe've been in (preliminary) discussions with them, already,Ó said Patrick, who added the New Mexico-based group was waiting for STB's decision before talking further.

??ÒWe've done this kind of rails to trails projects throughout the United States ,Ó he said. ÒWe have expertise in process of appraisals. I would say it's a national-caliber trail, running along the river. We'd love to be a partner in that.Ó

??The original proposal to restart the rail line brought protest from some, including the Center for Biological Diversity, which maintained if train cars running on that line were hauling toxic chemicals and spilled, it could be disastrous to the fragile riparian area and river.

??In February, Sotelo's group filed a financial offer, but withdrew it earlier this month.??

ÒIt was a risk we took, but a necessary one,Ó he said.??

However, at the July 18 Cochise County Board of Supervisors meeting, Sotelo said his group still wanted to buy the line.??

Sotelo would not say how much the group was offering, but it Òmore than a salvage company would.Ó??

He also declined to say who the group's lender was.

??ÒFrom what I understand, (the railroad company owner) is talking to someone else,Ó Sotelo said. ÒHe may negotiate with whom he wants.Ó

??John Dugan, president of the railroad company, could not be reached for comment on Monday.??

Sotelo said he and others are trying to save a 117-year-old asset, which has been running in harmony with our riparian area.

Sotelo said he wants to create jobs for both Arizona and Sonora, Mexico, and disagrees with those who believe the riparian environment is more important than the human environment.

The project does make sense, he added. We've identified cargo (that could be hauled) other than hazardous materials.

Michelle Herrington, rivers program director with the Center for Biological Diversity, said the center is very pleased with the turn of events.

It's absolutely excellent, she said. The San Pedro is so much better off without the possibility of this being turned into a toxic corridor.

Herrington added the idea that Sotelo's group could purchase the rail line is really 'out there' at this point.

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