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Walhalla stands on a precipice with land's future in its hands

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The lives of towns, same as with people, can sometimes turn on a single decision.

A decision that may not seem momentous, but is. And then you can't take it back, and for good or bad, all the rest follows.

The high school quarterback with NFL potential climbs onto his friend's motorcycle. The valedictorian gets married the week after graduation, thinking college is only postponed.

They probably all seemed like good ideas at the time.

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This is the point where Walhalla City Council members are. About to swing a leg over the motorcycle seat. About to say "I do."

Or not. A whole bunch of people are hoping it's "not."

Sometime around the first of the year, Mayor Lamar Bailes says, a developer approached the city about buying approximately 440 acres on Stumphouse Mountain that Walhalla owns next to Issaqueena Falls Park and the Stumphouse Tunnel.

An old water plant on the property once supplied the city's water. Otherwise, it's mostly pines.

Walhalla wasn't actively looking for a buyer, according to the mayor, and no decision has been made as yet.

But the city struggles to balance its budget and provide fire protection and water to a population of about 8,000, half of whom live outside the city limits, Bailes explains. To Walhalla, "a few million in the bank would be a blessing."

So in case they end up deciding to turn the motorcycle key, in the short span of time since the offer came in, the council has already taken the necessary steps: two readings and a public hearing.

Surprising many, who only learned of a possible sale in time to attend the hearing last week. To a person, nearly everyone who spoke was against selling the land. At least slow this thing down, some pleaded.

The property in question is above the falls. Putting in roads and curbing and maybe big resort houses on the mountainside couldn't be good for the naturally beautiful attraction.

Nor for the character and beauty of views toward the Blue Ridge that, left unspoiled, would be a vastly valuable and distinctive asset for Walhalla for years to come.

Frank Holleman, a Greenville attorney who is an Oconee County native, sent a letter to Walhalla's mayor and City Council on behalf of local conservation groups -- Naturaland Trust, Upstate Forever, The Nature Conservancy and the Chattooga Conservancy -- offering their help and expertise in finding a way to preserve the property and still bring in money for the city.

But the hour is very late.

Tonight at City Hall, weather allowing, the council will meet in executive session with the developer.

People who want to preserve the land are planning to go there and bring friends. Wait, they hope their presence says. Don't decide so fast. This is one of those decisions. You can make it only once.

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