



Developer's background questioned

By David Williams
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WALHALLA, SC — The Anderson Independent-Mail has determined that the developer attempting to buy 439.6 acres of Walhalla land on Stumphouse Mountain has an arrest record, including an arrest after a group of Atlanta doctors put \$500,000 into a land scheme in 1975.

When Buzz Williams, executive director of the Chattooga Conservancy, talked to developer Joe Simmons earlier this week, Mr. Williams said he did not know Mr. Simmons' background.

Mr. Williams said Friday he has learned a lot about Joseph (Joe or Joe Ed) Simmons, said to be the chief investor looking at the Walhalla property. Mr. Simmons reportedly is also interested in an additional 510 acres of privately owned land next to the city's Stumphouse Mountain property, as well as land on Lake Jocassee and Clayton, Ga., property.

Mr. Simmons spent two years in federal prison after lying to a Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) bank in Atlanta, according to the Florida Office of Comptroller. A search of the Internet found Mr. Simmons was 70 in April 1997 when he was arrested and charged in Palm Beach, Fla., on charges he took money intended for real estate investments.

Mr. Simmons, now 80, has had other run-ins with investors and the law.

The Salt Lake (Utah) Tribune published a story in 1994 about Mr. Simmons when he was called a major player in a \$16 billion plan to develop an island in the Bahamas. Although indicted in Utah federal court, Mr. Simmons' trial was canceled when prosecutors said they lacked evidence. In the 1997 Palm Beach, Fla., case an investigator in the Florida comptroller's office said Mr. Simmons' company was legitimate and Mr. Simmons had personally invested in his own firm.

Contacted Friday, Walhalla Mayor Lamar Bailes said he could not comment on Mr. Simmons' background.

"I've read the same articles, but I can not comment as to whether it is the same Mr. Simmons," Mayor Bailes said.

At Thursday's public meeting to discuss the possible sale of the city's property, one woman asked Walhalla City Council members what they knew about the developer. The council members said they learned about the developer in closed sessions and could not reveal what they knew.

Attempts to reach Walhalla attorney Stephanie Corley, who represents Mr. Simmons in the proposed Stumphouse Mountain deal, were unsuccessful Friday.

At 5:30 p.m. Wednesday, the mayor and council members are scheduled to meet behind closed doors with conservation representatives to discuss Naturaland Trust's \$2.2 million offer for the city's mountain

property.

Greenville attorney Frank Holleman, who represents Naturaland Trust and who has spoken at the city's public meetings in favor of preserving the property, said Friday he did not know about Mr. Simmons' past.

"I think the public deserves to know whether this is true or not," Mr. Holleman said.

Mr. Holleman said Naturaland Trust, Upstate Forever and The Nature Conservancy is willing to work with Walhalla to protect the property and the city's former water treatment plant that includes a 15-acre lake.

"Whatever they want to do with the water, we are willing to work with them," Mr. Holleman said.

Mr. Holleman also said his group would work with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources to preserve the area as a Wildlife Management area.

Mr. Williams said it was inevitable that the background of the developer would eventually become public and hoped Mr. Simmons has been up front with the council.

"Surely they must have known we would have found out with this much passion involved in the decision," Mr. Williams said. "It's just not a smart move."

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