

Stumped in Walhalla

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Almost 100 people stood outside Walhalla City Hall last week holding signs.

The diverse group of mothers, children, retirees and Walhalla natives was angry and worried about an Atlanta developer's plan to turn 439 acres of wilderness into a 200-home luxury housing development.

The city owns the tract off State 28 seven miles outside of town. It also abuts the most treasured cultural sites in the Walhalla area - Stumphouse Tunnel and Isaqueena Falls.

The council has not yet sold the land and the developer's offer of \$5,000 an acre is competing with an equal counteroffer from the Naturaland Trust, one of the state's oldest land preservation groups.

In addition to the \$2.2-million land sale, Mayor Lamar Bailes said the development could bring taxes and jobs to the town of 3,700 where shopfronts along Main Street lie empty and two plants have shut down.

The developer - Jordan, Jones and Goulding - has also offered to expand the Walhalla reservoir to provide city water for the next decade. The development includes an inn, an equestrian center, trails and the promise to keep as many trees as possible.

The City Council's vote on Jan. 9 to give itself the authority to sell the property was taken without public notice, and the second, Jan. 23, was taken without public comment. The public hearing, which drew a capacity crowd, was scheduled two days after the vote was final.

"The law doesn't say the public hearing has to be before the two readings," Bailes said.

Bob Ashcroft, a Walhalla resident, said the city should have held public hearings.

"Now that it's clear that they want to rush it through, people are getting their back to the wall," he said.

Development would cut off a wildlife corridor and invite more on private land nearby, said Buzz Williams, director of the Chattooga Conservancy. The property is in the middle of the Sumter National Forest.

Williams said he envisioned McMansions on Stumphouse Mountain, similar to developments throughout the Southern Appalachian Mountains.

"You're losing a keystone of wildlife," he said.

Then there's the cultural component, he said. Residents want to be involved in any decision that could affect the area. The city of Walhalla maintains a small park in the area, with picnic tables and a trail to an overlook of the falls.

The mile-long railroad tunnel, built in the 1840s and 1850s but never finished, has been a tourist attraction for decades. Railroad workers dug the tunnel by hand as part of a rail line that planners hoped to connect Charleston to Knoxville. The Civil War ended construction.

Legend has it that post-Civil War bandit Manse Jolly hid out in this tunnel along with other Confederate outlaws. Isaqueena Falls is also within walking distance.

Conservation groups, including the Chattooga Conservancy, Upstate Forever, Oconee Preservation Unlimited Stewardship Trust and the Naturaland Trust, have united to fight private development of the adjacent land.

The Naturaland Trust's \$2.2-million counteroffer would keep it under management of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, which has long held youth fishing and hunting exhibitions there.

Bailes said he welcomed public input, "but not this way - mob action."

Greenville attorney Frank Holleman III, who has served as spokesman for several of the conservation groups, said the issue, if debated openly, would boil down to values - short-term financial gains versus heritage. Besides, he said, studies have shown that residential properties drain more resources from cities than they add back in through property taxes.

"Any time you sell off a piece of your heritage, you can't regain it," he said.

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Eva Prado/Staff

STUMPING FOR STUMPHOUSE: Walhalla area residents and conservation advocates have argued that selling more than 400 acres outside the town to residential developers would be a net loss for the town - financially and culturally.