



# Conservation groups pitch proposal for Walhalla land

By David Williams  
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WALHALLA, SC — Less than 24 hours after a private developer pulled his offer off the table for Walhalla's Stumphouse Mountain property, the Walhalla City Council met behind closed doors for just over an hour with conservation representatives who are interested in preserving the 439.6 acres.

Greenville attorney Frank Holleman, an Oconee County native who represents Naturaland Trust, and Judy Cromwell, a Naturaland Trust board member and board secretary, were the only ones asked to stay in Wednesday's closed session that was called to order by mayor pro tem Randy Chastain.

Mayor Lamar Bailes, who arrived later, joined the council's meeting with Mr. Holleman, which lasted about 45 minutes before Tom Swaynham, Regional Wildlife Coordinator with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, and Dana Leavitt, land trust director with Upstate Forever, were invited inside.

Mr. Holleman said no decision was reached, but that it was a good meeting and he is very hopeful that a solution to protect the property could be found.

Mayor Bailes said he had no comment and the council would get together at a later date to take a look at the only offer now before the council.

About 15 people waited outside City Hall, including Kristen Austin, South Carolina-Southern Blue Ridge Project director with The Nature Conservancy, and Buzz Williams, executive director of the Chattooga Conservancy.

Before going into the meeting, Mr. Leavitt said the conservation efforts were in good hands with Mr. Holleman. Naturaland Trust has put \$2.2 million on the table to preserve the property that was sought by Tri States Asset and private developer Joe Simmons.

"It's a seamless operation," Mr. Leavitt said of the conservation groups working together. "And we would be happy to speak with adjoining land owners."

In a prepared statement Tuesday, Tri State Assets Inc. cited misinformation given to the public and the controversy surrounding the developer as reasons for withdrawing its offer.

Mayor Bailes earlier said the developer was considering building as many as 200 homes on the property and an inn for vacationers who could use an enlarged lake that once served as Walhalla's water source. Talks with the developer's representatives also centered on hiking and horse trails and rebuilding the water plant to provide Walhalla with a new water source.

Opposition to selling the land to the private developer, who reportedly was also seeking an additional 510 acres from a neighboring land owner, grew after the Anderson Independent-Mail was able to confirm that Mr. Simmons had past legal problems dealing with development projects.

Walhalla City attorney Julian Stoudemire also said there was misinformation about the pristine nature of the city's property on the mountain and stressed the developer's proposal did not affect Stumphouse Tunnel, which is owned by Clemson University, or Isaqueena Falls, which is owned by an Oconee County family.

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