



Stumphouse offer withdrawn

Council to meet with conservation trust today

By David Williams
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WALHALLA, SC — A private offer to purchase 439.6 acres of property owned by Walhalla on Stumphouse Mountain has been withdrawn.

Without naming Joseph Simmons, Tri State Assets Inc. cited misinformation given to the public and the controversy surrounding the developer as reasons for withdrawing its letter of intent to purchase property owned by the city of Walhalla.

Tri States Assets was the company through which Mr. Simmons was working. Mr. Simmons' representative in Walhalla, attorney Stephanie Corley, said she would issue a statement at a later date.

The Anderson Independent-Mail was able to confirm that Mr. Simmons has past legal problems dealing with development projects and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.

Walhalla City Attorney Julian Stoudemire said he was bothered by misinformation about the land being called "pristine."

"The land has been clear cut," Mr. Stoudemire said. "There are few adult trees on the property. The property is not some kind of pristine nature preserve."

Mr. Stoudemire also said there is about 84,000 acres of public land controlled by the U.S. Forest Service in Oconee County.

"Do the math," Mr. Stoudemire said. "There are 625 square miles in Oconee County or 400,000 acres and 21 percent of it is Forest Service land, not counting state parks."

Mr. Stoudemire also said 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. Walhalla leases both the tunnel and the falls for a park just off S.C. 28 north of the city.

Development talks on the city's land — and possibly an additional 510 acres of neighboring private mountain property — centered on about 200 homes, an inn for vacationers, hiking and horse trails. There also was discussion of refurbishing the city's old water treatment plant and expanding the 15-acre lake.

The mayor and council are scheduled to meet at 5:30 p.m. today in City Hall with representatives of Naturaland Trust, Upstate Forever and the Nature Conservancy. Naturaland Trust has put an offer of \$2.2 million on the table for the land.

Greenville attorney Frank Holleman, a native of Oconee County, said the withdrawal of the private developer's offer does not change anything from the viewpoint of the conservation groups he represents.

"This is a great opportunity to protect Stumphouse Mountain and the town's heritage and all the heritage of the Blue Ridge Mountains," Mr. Holleman said. "... Development is forever and is not reversible."

Buzz Williams, executive director of the Chattooga Conservancy, said a conservation easement for the property was very important. In partnership with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources management, restoration and erosion control was possible, he said.

Mr. Williams has also worked with former Oconee County council member J. Harold Thomas, who has organized a petition campaign to sell the property to a conservation group. On Tuesday, Mr. Thomas said more than 2,000 signatures have been collected, and about 1,000 of the signatures are from city residents.

"The citizens want the council to make a deal, set the land aside and get the \$2.2 million and put it in a good interest-bearing account," Mr. Thomas said.

Mayor Lamar Bailes was unavailable for comment Tuesday. The mayor and council members have stressed that no decision has been reached.

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