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1,000-acre Issaqueena Falls part of conservation project

By David Williams
Monday, June 18, 2007

What started earlier this year as an effort to save about 440 acres belonging to the city of Walhalla has mushroomed into nearly 1,000 acres earmarked for conservation.

The new tract includes [Issaqueena Falls](#) and two additional abandoned railroad tunnels on Stumphouse Mountain.

Calling it one of the greatest land and heritage conservation moves ever in the Upstate, Oconee and state leaders were joined for Monday's announcement by about 80 people at the Oconee Heritage Center in Walhalla.

The acquisition of an additional 511 acres next to Walhalla's watershed property has already begun with the [South Carolina chapter of The Nature Conservancy](#) entering a contract to buy the privately owned land.

"This is the way things are supposed to happen," state Sen. Thomas Alexander said of the conservation effort. "People have come together for the common good and a common cause. The greatest challenge for us is to provide for the generations that come after us."

The original effort to place Walhalla's land into the South Carolina Conservation Bank is scheduled for a review Wednesday in Greenville.

In March, the Walhalla City Council received a standing ovation following its unanimous vote to seek an application for a conservation easement instead of selling the former water plant site on Stumphouse Mountain.

Dana Leavitt, land trust director for Upstate Forever, said he was confident and optimistic the Walhalla part of the two-part project would receive financial assistance from the state's Conservation Bank,

Walhalla City Council member Ron Mattox said, "Hopefully Wednesday, we'll get some good news back."

"I think it's fantastic," said Greenville attorney Frank Holleman. "If ever there was a heritage site that needs protecting, this is it."

Mr. Holleman, a native of Oconee County, has worked with such conservation groups as The Nature Conservancy, Upstate Forever and the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources to produce the 1,000-acre protection package.

Mark Robertson, executive director of The Nature Conservancy of South Carolina, said the project reflects the serious effort to save the area.

The project includes Issaqueena Falls and what are called the Saddle Tunnel and Middle Tunnel on the old railroad bed leading to Stumphouse Tunnel. The falls and Saddle Tunnel and Middle Tunnel are now on private property.

The old railroad bed is already a hiking trail. Walhalla leases Stumphouse Tunnel and Issaqueena Falls for a city park. Clemson University will continue to own Stumphouse Tunnel while the falls and two other tunnels would become a heritage preserve.

The total cost of the project is estimated at about \$4.3 million.

The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources has committed \$1.5 million and the Graham Foundation, a private foundation in Greenville, has made a \$180,000 grant to the Nature Conservancy.

“It is believed to be the first time the foundation has supported a project outside of Greenville County,” Mr. Holleman said.

Mr. Holleman said the project would not be possible without the concerned families that now own the property.

Walhalla’s property is part of an application for the state’s Conservation Bank and could net the city \$1.2 million.

Walhalla officials hope to maintain control and even expand Stumphouse Tunnel and Issaqueena Falls Park. The city will also maintain water rights to the former reservoir that is on its property.

“We feel very good about the application,” Mr. Holleman said. “There is so much in the way of history and natural scenic importance and the land is next to the national forest (Sumter National Forest, Andrew Pickens District).”

Interim Oconee County Administrator Phyllis Lombard said she would like to see the county become involved and pursue matching grants for the project, called the Stumphouse Mountain and Issaqueena Falls project.

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