

Tunnel vision

BY GARY HYNDMAN
contributing writer

A parade of elected officials stepped to the podium at the Oconee Heritage Center, but it was the people who didn't speak who spearheaded a grassroots conservation campaign with major historical, ecological and cultural implications.

The press conference at a renovated tobacco warehouse in downtown Walhalla was held to announce a public/private partnership to preserve 951 acres at Stumphouse Mountain. It also proposes to protect public access to local landmarks, including scenic Issaqueena Falls and historic Stumphouse Tunnel.

Organizers must still raise \$1.42 million by Aug. 29.

The five-mile drive up Highway 28 from Walhalla follows a gentle grade past corn fields, mobile homes and a series of mom-and-pop shops. Turning off into the city park, the view is of falls and distant foothills majestic enough to attract visitors from across North America.

Just six months ago the land appeared headed for private development as a gated residential community.

But a group of about 20 local residents stepped in. With the help of area conservation groups, they orchestrated an improbable rescue mission to protect what they call an important part of their home-

town heritage.

Eddie Martin, Mary Shealy and J. Harold Thomas were strangers when they met in front of Walhalla City Hall last February. They were drawn there that night to hear public comment on a plan to sell the city's watershed property at Stumphouse Mountain to Atlanta developer Jordan, Jones and Goulding.

Walhalla, a town of 3,800 located north of Clemson, was settled by German immigrants. The empty shops along its Main Street today testify to the demise of the textile industry.

The proposal to build 200 luxury homes on the mountain gained the support of City Council with its prospects of injecting much needed revenue into city coffers.

Yet Martin, Shealy, Thomas and dozens of other citizens who showed up that night had reached consensus that there were more important things at stake.

"It was selfless," said Frank Holleman III, a Greenville attorney and conservationist who volunteered his time on the project. "I mean it was all these broader values people were rising up about."

The citizens had virtually no experience as activists. But they shared a collective outrage that the public property that they consider priceless was about to fall into private hands.

"My first reaction was it was going to be a done deal," said Thomas, a lo-

cal builder, land developer and former Oconee County Council member who learned about the hearing from a City Council member.

City Council had approved an ordinance giving itself authority to sell the land. The public hearing was scheduled to meet legal requirements prior to the sale.

Martin, who owns a Walhalla feed-and-seed store, heard about the proposed sale on the radio. Shealy, a special education aide at an elementary school, spotted a newspaper story in the school library.

The crowd filled Council chambers, spilling outside on the lawn. Of the more than 20 people who addressed council, none spoke in favor of the project.

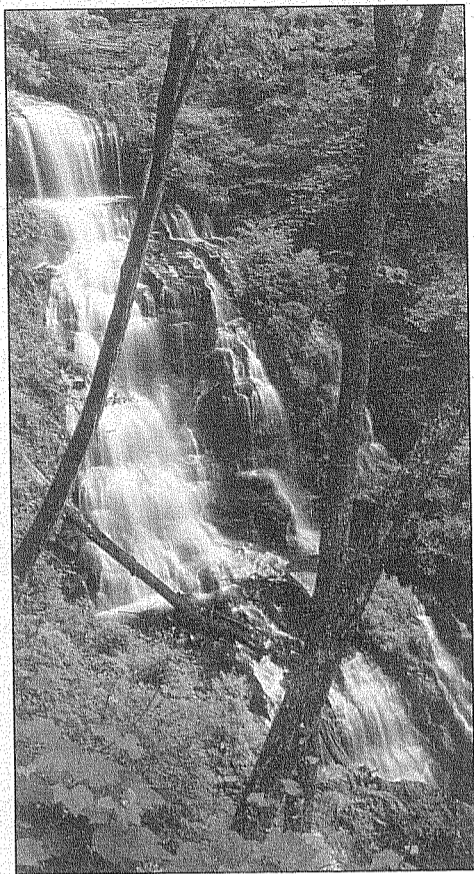
Many called up memories as their inspiration.

Shealy and her husband courted at the base of Issaqueena Falls. Martin took his grown children hiking on the mountain when they were young and does the same today with his 7-year-old.

"I think it's a tremendous, heartfelt property to the community," he said.

As a boy, the 71-year-old Thomas used to walk the pipeline from the city swimming pool up to the mountain reservoir that supplied its water. He also played in and around the three man-made tunnels there.

After the hearing, citizens mingled outside with representatives from >



Bill Robinson/Contributing photographer

TOURIST ATTRACTION: Issaqueena Falls, located on Stumphouse Mountain in Oconee County, is named for the Creek maiden who according to legend rode 96 miles on horseback to warn her lover of a Cherokee attack.

> conservation groups. The genesis of a campaign known as "Save Stumphouse" was born that night.

Together, they scheduled a meeting a couple of nights later at Walhalla's St. John's Lutheran Church.

Meeting as often as twice a week at the church or the American Legion, the volunteers organized a petition drive that collected more than 2,000 signatures opposing the sale.

Perhaps their biggest challenge was staying motivated.

"It looked pretty bleak a lot of times," said Shealy, recalling the nights she banged on doors in strange neighborhoods collecting signatures.

The group also organized opposition at a second public hearing at Oconee County Council chambers. To prepare, they sprawled on the floor of Martin's store making posters.

The second hearing proved decisive. All but one of the speakers that night spoke against selling the land.

The developer subsequently withdrew the offer.

Ron Maddox, a Walhalla City Council member, said he doesn't know why. "I don't think it was necessarily public opposition. It was more public involvement, which is the way communities are supposed to be run," he said.

Despite the developer's decision to pull out, it became apparent Stumphouse Mountain was still vulnerable.

The Blue Ridge Mountains have become desirable for residential development because of their natural beauty, comfortable climate and relatively low cost of real estate. Those private interests are now clashing with environmental groups who say the land and its native wildlife are threatened by increased urbanization.

Kristen Austin of The Nature Conservancy calls the region's biological diversity special.

"The Blue Ridge Escarpment is a place unparalleled," she said.

The city's property includes a watershed that once served as its reservoir. Some say it needs protection as a future water source.

It's managed by the Department of Natural Resources, which maintains one of a handful of public youth hunting grounds across the state.

The city also operates the small park off Highway 28 for visitors to Issaqueena Falls and Stumphouse Tunnel, but it owns neither. The tunnel belongs to Clemson University, while the falls are privately held and only publicly accessible by a lease with the property owners that could be terminated on short notice.

Citizens later learned the developer's plan included purchase of additional private acreage that could have jeopardized that agreement.

The mountain is also the site of a Cherokee ancestral burial ground. Nell Crowe, vice-chief of the Cherokee Bear Clan of South Carolina, said her people consider the property sacred.

For all those reasons, the citizens turned to the conservation groups for technical support to permanently protect the property.

Upstate Forever, a nonprofit organization that promotes sensible growth, has agreed to hold a conservation easement on Walhalla's 440-acre watershed property. The South Carolina Conservation Bank board voted this week to provide \$1.2 million to purchase the easement, generating needed revenue for the city.

In addition, the Nature Conservancy will purchase an adjacent 511 acres of private property. The S.C. Department of Natural Resources has agreed to provide \$1.5 million toward its acquisition and will designate the property a Heritage Trust Preserve.

The Graham Foundation of Greenville has committed \$180,000.

Austin said private property owners who had agreed to sell to the developer approached her about ways to be included in the conservation project.

Several families, who asked to remain anonymous as a condition of the sale, traded real estate to make their property lines contiguous with the public land, said Upstate Forever's Dana Leavitt.

The result is an outdoor recreational playground, featuring old-growth hardwood forests, inspiring views, tourist attractions and a hiking trail—and all of it directly connected to Sumter National Forest.

City Council must still approve the conservation easement and money raised to purchase the remaining real estate.

"This is precious to keep for our future kids," Thomas said.