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Feel good about saving 1,000 acres

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However this comes out -- and that depends on you -- Frank Holleman was right.

It's been, he said, "an unexpected series of heart-lifting events that makes you feel good about the people you live among."

The application to the South Carolina Conservation Bank for money to protect approximately 440 acres on the side of Stumphouse Mountain was signed by the nonprofit conservation group Upstate Forever (www.upstateforever.org).

But the real applicants were the people of Walhalla and Oconee County, Holleman said.

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They made their application by filling up meeting rooms and speaking their hearts and putting their names on petitions.

When a developer wanted to buy the tract that was once the city of Walhalla's watershed and is still owned by the city, the people said no.

The Blue Ridge escarpment rises steep and forested in the near distance outside Walhalla, as it has since long before there ever was a Walhalla, and to look up at it is like stepping back in time.

Some things you keep.

Because the families who came to own the land were such good stewards, a wealth of wildflowers and wildlife continues to exist there. Salamanders, migrating songbirds, rare bats.

The opportunity to save such a place forever "comes along only once in a lifetime, or maybe a number of lifetimes," Bill Sandifer, state representative for parts of Oconee and Pickens counties, told a gathering at the Oconee Heritage Center in Walhalla on Monday.

The gathering was to announce a second conservation effort, this one to protect 511 acres of hardwood forest adjoining the property owned by the city.

Among the special prizes on this tract: Issaqueena Falls, more than 100 feet high, and two historic railroad tunnels, part of the same pre-Civil War project as the famous Stumphouse Tunnel, owned by Clemson University.

Until the developer's offer on Walhalla's former watershed next door and his rumored interest in buying additional neighboring acreage, a good many didn't realize the celebrated falls are privately owned and only leased by the city.

The lease can be terminated with a 30-day notice.

The owners, local families concerned about the longtime future, have agreed to sell to the nonprofit Nature Conservancy (www.nature.org/southcarolina) to permanently preserve the land and falls for public use.

Price: about \$4.3 million. How good a deal is this? The Conservancy already has commitments for about three-fourths of the money.

The state Department of Natural Resources is contributing \$1.5 million. The Graham Foundation of Greenville, \$180,000.

Various other public grants are pending.

The Conservancy is left with \$1.42 million to raise. By Aug. 29.

On Wednesday, the state Conservation Bank voted unanimously to fund an easement on Walhalla's watershed tract.

The watershed and the next-door property the Nature Conservancy wants to buy would make 1,000 acres altogether.

It's a lot overall, this \$1.42 million. But less than \$1.50 per each person living in just the five closest counties. You spend more to rent a movie.

It will be long remembered who saved the mountain.

And people will feel good, in fact proud, to live among you.
