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We have a chance to preserve a piece of 'wildness'

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GUEST COLUMNIST

The Upstate boasts many natural treasures, but none is more breathtaking than the Blue Ridge escarpment. The southern edge of the stately mountain chain spans 85 miles from the Georgia border to Lake Lure, N.C., and includes panoramic views, spectacular waterfalls, hiking trails, and granite outcroppings, cascading rivers, abundant wildlife and lush vegetation.

Over the last 10 years or so, heroic efforts by state agencies, conservation organizations and dedicated individuals have converted many of the 400,000 rugged acres making up the escarpment into permanent land trusts and state forests.

The latest parcel to be preserved is nearly 1,000 acres of pristine mountain habitat in Oconee County near Stumphouse Mountain and Issaqueena Falls Park, about seven miles north of Walhalla off State 28. After a Florida developer announced plans to construct homes and a hotel on the property, a coalition of groups and individuals mobilized to promote an exciting alternative.

The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, supported by conservation organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, the Naturaland Trust and Upstate Forever, and bolstered by a platoon of committed individuals, convinced the Walhalla City Council to help raise the funds needed to preserve the pristine property. At the same time, the acreage that includes 100-foot-tall Issaqueena Falls will be purchased and converted into a permanent public park.

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But all of this comes at a price. This unique public/private initiative needs to raise \$4.3 million by Sept. 1. The good news is that well over \$3 million has already been donated.

Why does this effort deserve our support? Look around. Residential and commercial growth in the Greenville area is accelerating. Sprawl engulfs us. Asphalt and concrete are displacing forests at a dizzying rate, both around Greenville and across the nation.

Each year the United States loses about 2 million acres of open space, farms and forest to development. Growth is often a good thing; so is preservation. Balancing the two is the key to successful community development.

Finding the right balance is not easy. Protecting land from development is often contentious -- and expensive. Yet if we do not act now to preserve our wild things and wild places, then the region's dazzling natural resources will be diminished -- as will our quality of life.

There are other reasons to preserve and protect this strategic property. It is steeped in historical significance. In the mid-19th century, tiny Walhalla was poised to become one of the great trading cities in the South through the construction of the Blue Ridge Railroad. The historic rail line -- an ambitious dream of business leaders and railroad promoters since the 1820s and statesman John C. Calhoun's top priority -- was intended to link bustling Charleston to Louisville, Cincinnati and other ports along the busy Ohio River. In 1852 South Carolina legislators allocated funds to establish the Blue Ridge Railroad Co., which would assume the task of completing the rail line -- portions of which were already in place.

By 1854, rail lines stretched north from Charleston to Walhalla, and a connecting spur in Anderson extended to Greenville. Walhalla, railway promoters agreed, would serve as the final stopover before the railway made the difficult climb into the Blue Ridge Mountains.

To traverse the mountains required burrowing a tunnel more than a mile long through the dense granite of Stumphouse Mountain near Mountain Rest, above Walhalla. The monumental project would have created the longest tunnel in the United States. Early in 1854, nearly 3,000 construction workers -- most of them Irish and German immigrants -- converged in Oconee County to begin gouging out three tunnel segments.

Yet the mountain proved stronger than the men. By 1860 the tunnel, 25 feet high and 17 feet wide, was less than a fourth complete. The coming Civil War, budget overruns and the stubborn granite of Stumphouse Mountain killed the grandiose project. What remains are the three partially completed tunnel segments, their stone walls maintaining a steady 56 degrees year-round, connecting nothing, but providing a cool respite for summer hikers. Two of the three tunnels lie within the parcel that The Nature Conservancy is seeking to preserve. (The main Stumphouse Tunnel continues to be owned and maintained by Clemson University.)

The 19th-century naturalist Henry David Thoreau might have had the Stumphouse Mountain property in mind when he said, "In wildness is the preservation of the world." To the extent that we can help preserve forever this strategic parcel of "wildness," then future generations of Upstate residents will be able to enjoy its remarkable treasures.

Check it out yourself. You will be awed, amazed and inspired by its natural splendor and its spiritual solace. To contribute to the fund-raising effort, contact The Nature Conservancy at 2231 Devine St., Suite 100, Columbia, SC 29205.
