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Walhalla accepts \$1.2 million to save Stumphouse Mountain property

By David Williams
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WALHALLA — Walhalla City Council accepted a check for \$1.2 million Tuesday from the South Carolina Conservation Bank to establish a conservation easement on city property on Stumphouse Mountain.

The agreement completes half of the conservation drive to save nearly 1,000 acres of the historic mountain that includes Issaqueena Falls as well as abandon railroad tunnels and railroad beds that are now used as hiking trails.

“It’s been a long, long struggle,” said Mayor Lamar Bailes. “I appreciate all that has been done.”

Former Oconee County Council member J. Harold Thomas thanked the council for entering into the conservation agreement.

“This is a spectacular piece of property, and I can see the park one day being the biggest tourist attraction in the Upstate of South Carolina,” Mr. Thomas said.

The final survey of the property shows 450 acres that will now be protected, said Dana Leavitt, land trust director with Upstate Forever, the agency that helped negotiate the agreement.

The city still will have timber and water rights to the property that includes the city’s former water treatment plant and reservoir.

The city also plans to continue operating Stumphouse Tunnel and Issaqueena Falls Park. The city can also expand the park and will have access to the watershed lake.

“The citizens of Walhalla spoke out about the importance of protecting this property, and the City Council listened,” Mr. Leavitt said.

Mayor Bailes asked the City Council finance committee to come up with a plan for the \$1.2 million.

The unanimous vote of the council to enter the agreement drew a standing ovation from about 20 people who attended the public hearing about the agreement Tuesday prior to the regular council meeting. No one left the meeting as the council took up the official approval of the contract in its regular session.

The second half of the 1,000-acre conservation pact includes roughly 511 acres of privately owned land adjacent to the city’s property.

The tract is now under contract with the South Carolina chapter of The Nature Conservancy, and the drive to complete the purchase of that tract needs about \$75,000, according to Frank Holleman, an Oconee County native and Greenville attorney who is working with the Stumphouse Mountain project. The entire project is projected to cost about \$4.3 million to complete and the private property purchase faces an Aug. 29 deadline.

Once that contract is signed the privately held property would be placed into a Heritage Preserve with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources.

Walhalla businessman Eddie Martin, who is helping arrange a fundraiser for the project, expressed his appreciation to the City Council for saving their portion of Stumphouse Mountain.

“When this started it was this side and that side,” Mr. Martin said, “Now, let’s hope it’s all one side.”

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