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Stumphouse Mountain Saved

By David Williams
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OCONEE COUNTY — Thunderous applause from nearly 50 people crowded into the Oconee Heritage Center Thursday followed Frank Holleman's announcement that "Stumphouse is saved."

What began in January as a grassroots effort to stop private development of about 450 acres of watershed property belonging to Walhalla on Stumphouse Mountain ended this week with the announcement that \$4.5 million had been pulled together, and almost 1,000 acres is now in the hands of conservation organizations.

Mr. Holleman noted that Walhalla Mayor Lamar Bailes signed a conservation easement for the city's land on Aug. 14, and on Tuesday The Nature Conservancy acquired 511 acres adjoining the city's property.

The 1,000 acres includes most of Walhalla's Stumphouse Tunnel and Issaqueena Falls Park, more than two miles of pre-Civil War railroad beds that are now hiking trails, two unfinished railroad tunnels and Cherokee Indian burial sites.

Summing up what has been accomplished, Mr. Holleman, an Oconee County native and Greenville attorney who worked with the various conservation groups said, "We have said to the Cherokee who roamed these hills before the Europeans arrived, and who are buried there today, to Issaqueena and her husband Allen Francis, to John Wagener and our German ancestors who bought part of Stumphouse when they first arrived here, to the Irish laborers who moved to a strange place to blast a tunnel in a mountain, to the city fathers of Walhalla who had the wisdom to set aside part of this mountain for the public good, to the local families who managed the mountainside with care during the 20th century, and to our parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, ministers and scout leaders who took us up to Stumphouse when we were children -- 'We remember. We remember you, we value what you have given us and we will protect this heritage forever.' "

Mark Robertson, executive director of The Nature Conservancy in South Carolina, said more than 1,118 people have contributed to the campaign along with South Carolina agencies and private foundations.

It also was revealed that the fundraising netted a \$300,000 matching contribution from Fred and Alice Stanback of Salisbury, N.C. The owner of Stanback headache medication also has helped save the North Carolina portion of the Jocassee Gorges and North Carolina's Chimney Rock.

The Stumphouse land eventually will be placed in a heritage preserve, the highest level of protection under South Carolina law, and will be accessible to the public.

South Carolina Rep. Bill Whitmire, R-Walhalla, recalled when he was mayor of Walhalla in the late 1990s that then-council members Tommy Crumpton and Hal Duke were joined by city workers at the site of the

Stumphouse Tunnel when there was no park.

“At the time the tunnel was boarded up,” Mr. Whitmire said. “When they pulled those boards away, it was like a breath of fresh air.”

Walhalla has operated the park ever since and will continue to operate the park. The city could expand the park amenities, which now include the reservoir that was at one time the city’s water source.

Walhalla businessman Eddie Martin, who joined the grassroots effort Concerned Citizens for Saving the Stumphouse, said he could see a tide of development washing over this corner of the Upstate.

“We could not let our gateway to the Blue Ridge Mountains be marred,” Mr. Martin said.

J. Harold Thomas, also an organizer of the local effort to save the mountain, called for an annual picnic at the Walhalla park to be held the last Saturday of every August.

“We’re going to still meet, in case we’re called back into action,” Mr. Thomas said.

Dana Leavitt, land trust director for Upstate Forever, said a reporter asked him what the largest gift was in the drive.

“It was the gift of time and energy the people of Oconee County gave,” Mr. Leavitt said.

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