

VOICES

THE GREENVILLE NEWS EDITORIAL

'Great' wallets saved Stumphouse Mountain

People rose to the challenge when a special part of the Upstate was threatened with development

People in this area have done an extraordinary thing. They have saved Stumphouse Mountain, guaranteeing that its natural beauty will remain untouched and its wildflowers, wildlife and rich heritage will be passed down to our children's children.

When threatened by development that would have turned this beloved little corner of the world into the home of a gated community and a small hotel, people who hold a special place in their hearts for Stumphouse Mountain and Issaqueena Falls acted mightily. They dug deep into their pockets and gave. Some came through with large checks, while others gave the contents of their piggy bank.

When the final numbers were tallied and the announcement was made last week, a huge victory was won by all. Nature lovers prevailed, and the Nature Conservancy declared that "one of the last great places on earth" had been saved.

It started like this: word got out early this year that this area where so many people have hiked, enjoyed picnics and bonded with nature was being eyed by out-of-state developers. Citizens in Walhalla voiced their displeasure, and so did many others who have fond memories of Stumphouse Mountain and Issaqueena Falls.

A total of \$4.3 million was needed to purchase the almost 1,000 acres to ensure it would remain, in perpetuity, the "people's land." The South Carolina Chapter of the Nature Conservancy and Upstate Forever spearheaded this effort to secure the funding to preserve this area of regional and state-wide significance.

Progress came early when commitments of \$1.5 million and \$1.2 million were secured, respectively, from the state's Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Bank. The Conservation Bank check eventually went to the city of Walhalla for its former watershed, and the tract will be placed under a conservation easement with Upstate Forever. No development will be in the land's future, but instead it will be preserved as a place where people can continue to enjoy nature.

The second half of the "Save Stumphouse" campaign was wrapped up last week, and its successful completion required the public — that's people with limited means and others who could write checks with several "zeros" at the end — to step up to the challenge. And they did.

The Graham Foundation, a private foundation in Greenville, gave \$180,000 to the effort. An anonymous donor pledged \$300,000 for a challenge grant. And people flooded the Nature Conservancy of South Carolina with their love letters to Stumphouse, and they included checks along with their recollections of trips to this place they could not bear to think of as belonging to a privileged few.

In less than nine weeks, 1,118 private donors sent checks ranging from \$1 to tens of thousands of dollars, according to a story last week by *Greenville News* reporter Mike Foley. So the Nature Conservancy was able to acquire the title to 511 acres of Stumphouse Mountain from private landholders. This tract includes the 100-foot Issaqueena Falls, two of the three Stumphouse Mountain tunnels and a two-mile trail along the Blue Ridge Railroad.



ALAN DEVORSEY/Staff

Elizabeth Bennett, left, and daughter Debbie leave the Stumphouse Tunnel after a brief visit.

Mark Robertson, executive director for the Nature Conservancy in South Carolina, described the heroic fundraising effort as "completely without

precedent in South Carolina." That so much money was raised so quickly from so many people, many of whom are of modest means, demonstrates

the depth of love for this special corner of South Carolina. And it shows what people are willing to do when such a place could be lost to them forever.