

Nine Times deadline looms

By Charles Sowell
Staff Writer

Efforts to preserve the bulk of the Nine Times tract, one of the largest undeveloped parcels of land left along the Blue Ridge Escarpment, have hit an economic speed bump, according to Dana Leavitt, land trust director for Upstate Forever.

Funding sources have dried up for the purchase of the land. The region's premiere conservation group "went out on a limb" in 2007 and purchased 560 acres of habitat from Duke Energy and set up a two-year option to buy the remaining 1,648 for \$4,800 an acre.

A November deadline looms large for the option to purchase.

Upstate Forever plans to ask Duke for an extension and, perhaps, for a reduction in price.

"Economic realities being what they are, we don't think that's unreasonable," Leavitt said.

New rounds of meetings with public and private groups are set as Upstate Forever tries to forge a coalition of groups similar to the one that came up with the purchase price of Stumphouse Mountain in Oconee County.

"We've gotten the most ecologically important section of the tract (the 560 acres on the southwest side of E. Preston McDaniel Highway) protected," Leavitt said. That acreage was purchased by The Nature Conservancy and contains hundreds of species of rare or endangered plants.

The conservancy plans to open that section of the tract to the public this spring.

"That leaves 1,648 acres remaining on our original option with Crescent (the land development arm of Duke Energy)," said Leavitt.

After Wadakoe Mountain, Nine Times has been called the most environmentally sensitive area in the region. Wadakoe enjoys special protected status as a state Heritage Trust site, a designation Nine Times does not have.

Like Wadakoe, Nine Times is crossed with power lines. Those steel towers are aesthetically unpleasing to the eye, but virtual habitat generators for wildlife and plant species that depend on open sunlight.

And there have been some unintended consequences, too, according to Leavitt. "Were it not for tension lines, the Nine Times tract probably would have been developed years ago," he said.



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Dennis Chastain looks over private property running up the borders of the Nine Times tract.

And those same power line corridors provide food in abundance for wildlife and for local residents who have a fondness for blackberries in season.

Many of the locals have come to look on access to the tract as something of a right, said Leavitt.

"They've hunted on it; berry picked there, and walked and picnicked. That could be

lost on the bulk of the property."

That's if Duke decides to hold Upstate Forever's feet to the fire on the purchase option and if the power giant can find another purchaser willing to pay \$4800 an acre for a very large tract of land in a depressed market - two big ifs, indeed.

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