

Oconee County

Conservationists celebrate victory, say efforts must continue

BY RAY CHANDLER
Special to Independent Mail

WALHALLA — Conservationists who rallied to save Stumphouse Mountain from development reminded themselves Saturday that their efforts must ongoing even as they gathered to celebrate their two-year-old victory.

"We can't stop here. We have to get more involved to save more of our natural world," Eddie Martin said to a gathering of about 175 at Stumphouse Mountain.

Martin, who is part of Opus Trust, one of the groups involved in the Stumphouse Mountain conservation effort, was one of the organizers of Saturday's rally and picnic to mark the second anniversary of the effort that saw nearly 1,000 acres encompassing the Stumphouse Mountain tunnel and Issaqueena Falls placed in conservation easements.

J. Harold Thomas, also a key figure in the 2007 effort, said he hoped a rally such as the one Saturday could take place every odd year as a reminder of what had been accomplished and of what remains to be done.

"We can't just sit back," he said about conservation efforts. "We need to keep going."

Thomas said the Oconee County Council should be urged to form a conservation bank that would be funded every year to enable more land to be preserved.

A conservation effort began after an early 2007 attempt by a



Caleb Bynum, 13, left, watches as Russell Kuemmerer, 6, jumps off a group of logs at Celebrate Stumphouse at Stumphouse Mountain Park in Oconee County.

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Florida developer to acquire the city of Walhalla's Stumphouse Mountain watershed property, about 440 acres.

Conservation groups such as The Nature Conservancy, Upstate Forever, Naturaland Trust, the Opus Trust, the Chattooga Con-

servancy and Oconee Preservation Unlimited Stewardship Trust rallied in a months-long effort to raise money to preserve the sce-

nic natural area.

By August 2007, the various groups had raised about \$4.5 million from government sources and private donations. In total, more than 1,100 individuals from more than 100 cities and towns across the country also contributed.

The city of Walhalla accepted \$1.2 million to put the 440 acres in a conservation easement held in perpetuity by Upstate Forever. The Nature Conservancy acquired 511 additional acres on Stumphouse, including Issaqueena Falls, two of the tunnels on the mountain, a public hiking trail on two miles of the old Blue Ridge Railroad bed and mountainside forests. In December 2007 most of those 511 acres were turned over to the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources to become a heritage preserve.

Frank Holleman, a Greenville attorney originally from Oconee County and one of the leaders of the 2007 conservation effort, said the same desire to save the area had brought a lot of disparate people and groups together.

"It wasn't preordained that we'd succeed," Holleman said. "We could have had a bankrupt development here now."

"But this shows what a lot of people of good will working together can accomplish. People who had no special or personal interest except to preserve our natural beauty."