

Wyche donates land

Jones Gap State Park gets 305 acres

BY CHARLES SOWELL | STAFF

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CONSERVATIONIST Tommy Wyche and his Natureland Trust have donated 305 acres on a mountain called Grassy Top worth \$1.8 million to Jones Gap State Park.

The land will link the park to another tract purchased by The Nature Conservancy to the east. That tract, at 300 acres, will expand the park's boundaries by more than 600 acres and help build a link along the Blue Wall stretching nearly to U.S. 25.

Wyche has another project going on, perhaps the most ambitious one of all, to raise \$30 million to purchase two large tracts of land that front the Blue Wall in Pickens County.

"What I need to find is a billionaire who has a conservationist bent," Wyche said during an interview in his downtown law office.



View from Glassy Top Mountain

Wyche has been raising money to preserve land along the Blue Wall for decades. Just 18 months ago he published a picture book entitled "Conserve a Legacy" to promote land purchases done by the state Conservation Land Bank across the state.

The book was designed primarily to promote the land bank, Wyche said, and so far has not raised enough money

to cover the costs of printing the glossy hardcover.

He is more hopeful about a spiral-bound brochure he recently had printed called "A Special Conservation Opportunity."

It deals with two tracts—a 1,800-acre plot called Tall Pines that borders on Greenville County and 1,700 acres of the Nine Times Tract farther west—that are ripe with rare

and endangered plant species. A 560-acre portion of Nine Times was purchased recently by The Nature Conservancy and is being set up with trails as a nature area where visitors can see some of the rarest plant species in the East.

The remaining portion of Nine Times was under a purchase option by a coalition of conservation groups headed by Upstate Forever. That group was unable to raise the purchase price and the property is now for sale by Crescent Resources, Duke Energy's land management division.

Tall Pines was purchased for development several years ago for \$20 million, but the start of the Great Recession shot down plans to develop the land for housing. Wyche believes the property could be bought for considerably less than the developers paid for it.

Kristin Austin, project director for The Nature Conservancy, said she feels less of a sense of urgency for Nine Times since the area is more remote than at Tall Pines.



> That area, located about 30 miles from downtown Greenville, is fronted by the Chandler Heritage Preserve, Wildcat Wayside State Park and the Ashmore Heritage Preserve to the north. To the west is the Townes Conservation Easement held by Upstate Forever and to the east is a large tract of land owned by the textile giant Milliken.

The Grassy Top donation is Natureland Trust's match required by the Conservation Bank for the purchase

price of Asbury Hills at the foot of Caesar's Head. That tract is almost 2,000 acres.

Grassy Top is one of the highest points in South Carolina, at 3,269 feet (just 300 feet lower than Sassafras Mountain, the state's highest peak) and has stunning views of the Piedmont rolling out 2,000 feet below.

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