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Conservancy project hopes to secure natural treasures

By JEAN CROW, For the Herald-Journal

WALHALLA - Rarely do you find a tract of land that bears not only ecological importance, but also cultural, historical and recreational significance, as well.

So when developers sought to purchase the tract of land that includes Stumphouse Mountain and Isaqueena Falls in Walhalla, area residents were quick to take the defensive.

As a result, the city of Walhalla responded and began taking steps to protect the 440 acres it owns there with a conservation easement, while local conservation groups launched a campaign to purchase an additional 511 acres adjacent to the city's property.

In total, the Stumphouse Mountain project, spearheaded by the Nature Conservancy and Upstate Forever, will cost \$4.3 million and protect close to 1,000 acres of land that includes the 100-foot Isaqueena Falls, a pre-Civil War railroad bed and two of the three massive tunnels that were built along its course, sacred Cherokee burial sites and the unique biodiversity of this hardwood forest area.

In addition, it will connect the protected lands of the Andrew Pickens District of Sumter National Forest, which abuts the property at its north and south ends, and close an important gap in the area's natural habitat.

While a commitment of \$1.5 million from the S.C. Department of Natural Resources and \$1.227 million from the S.C. Conservation Bank have given the project a running start, the Nature Conservancy must raise an additional \$1.42 million by the end of August. For this, the group is looking to the generations of Upstate residents who have enjoyed the Stumphouse property and can't bear the thought of a community asset being lost to private interests.

Four miles of relatively flat, inviting hiking trails follow along the railroad bed that was built in the mid-19th century with the hope of connecting South Carolina goods to the markets of the Midwest. The state spent twice its annual budget at the time to implement the project and enlisted scores of Irish immigrant workers, many of whose descendents still live in the Upstate.

When the Civil War erupted, the project was abandoned, leaving behind numerous footprints, including

Stumphouse Tunnel, the largest of the three tunnels, which was used for many years to store blue cheese cultivated at Clemson University's Agricultural Department.

If the conservation effort is successful, the Nature Conservancy will be able to turn ownership of Isaqueena Falls over to the city of Walhalla, which will secure a conservation easement to protect the property from any future development and ensure that the public continues to enjoy the site as a community treasure.

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