VOICES

THE GREENVILLE NEWS EDITORIAL

Help Jones Gap State Park grow

South Carolina is inching tantalizingly close to acquiring a swath of land that will greatly expand Jones Gap State Park, one of the Upstate's most treasured and beautiful places. Standing in the way is a $275,000 fundraising gap that the Nature Conservancy has until June 30 to bridge, according to a recent report *The Greenville News*.

Given the short time frame, the Nature Conservancy and other organizations working to acquire the property are hoping for what a recent *Greenville News* report termed a "Hail Mary" donor. At the same time, it's been incremental donations from individuals that have inched the fundraising toward its goal, said Kristin Austin of The Nature Conservancy's Greenville office.

This project is worthwhile and it would be encouraging to see those with the means step up to ensure that Jones Gap State Park grows. Of course, anyone who wants to can give what they can to make this expansion happen. Not only would the expansion make this Upstate destination bigger for all to enjoy, it would preserve important natural lands in the most beautiful part of South Carolina, and one of the nation's most picturesque regions.

If the acquisition is completed, The Nature Conservancy would have roughly 300 acres that it plans to donate to the South Carolina State Parks system to add to Jones Gap. That would add to roughly 300 acres that Naturaland Trust donated last year that would connect Jones Gap to the Nature Conservancy property.

Naturaland Trust's donation last fall encompassed 305 acres valued at $1.8 million and included Grassy Top Mountain, one of South Carolina's highest peaks.

In an artfully written story in the April 22 *Greenville News*, reporter Mike Foley conveyed the beauty and the importance of the land in the Mountain Bridge Wilderness area, and particularly the new swath of land that The Nature Conservancy wants to make part of Jones Gap.

The fact that private organizations want to donate such a large piece of property to a state park is significant. The state owes its gratitude to those who want to make this land available to everyone in South Carolina. All told, the donations would swell Jones Gap's acreage from 3,346 acres to nearly 4,000 acres.

The acreage that would be added contains an unnamed 225-foot waterfall, building-sized boulders that provide habitats for plants and animals, nesting grounds for migratory birds, a natural population of rainbow trout and habitats for many types of wildlife like black bear, grouse, deer and turkeys, according to Foley's report.

In an op-ed on these pages back in March, Frank Holleman of Naturaland Trust called obtaining the property a "once-in-a-millennium chance." He rightly summarized Jones Gap as one of the most beautiful places in America, saying "its beauty rivals that of some ... famous national parks."

While The Nature Conservancy's goal would be made easier with a "Hail Mary" donor, it's certainly possible for many smaller donors to still come together and raise the last $275,000 to move this purchase forward so one of South Carolina's best state parks can become even better.

Donations for the Jones Gap project can be sent to The Nature Conservancy's Columbia office at 2231 Devine St., Suite 100, Columbia, S.C. 29205. Questions can be directed to Kristen Austin in Greenville at (864) 233-4988.