Momentum building for Sassafras upgrades

Fund-raising efforts begin to improve state's top peak

By Eric Connor
Staff writer
econnor@greenvilleonline.com

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For decades, the potential in the long-neglected peak of South Carolina's tallest mountain was there to see — even if the majestic valleys that free the eye were obscured by a lack of vision.

In recent months, the momentum has built to make more of Sassafras Mountain than simply a factoid in school children's textbooks.

The improvements have come in increments: Some trees cleared and a modest timber overlook built, a stone marking the height of the peak, a paved road to make the winding journey less treacherous.

The grand vision — a four-story observation tower offering 360-degree views 50 miles into the distance — is still elusive as Clemson University's best and brightest architectural students design and build improvements along the way.

But it's getting closer, and now, volunteers say, the time to fund the $1 million project with private money has arrived.

To start the fund-raising effort, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources now is overseeing the sale of commemorative bricks that will be placed at the base of the tower.

The bricks — sold through the Harry Hampton Memorial Wildlife Fund, which has contributed $25,000 to the

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cause — can be engraved with the names of contributors or in honor of friends and family members.

Three brick choices range from $100 to $500 to $1,000.

Meanwhile, a group of Clemson landscape and architecture graduate students have designed and constructed a newer overlook atop the mountain.

The original overlook, constructed by the Department of Natural Resources of native wood in 2010, offered an expansive glimpse into what Sassafras could be as it opened views to the Jocassee Valley, the outer shores of Lake Hartwell and into Georgia in the distance.

The tower would provide views of the peaks and valleys of four states, including the Jocassee Gorges, which was recently named in National Geographic's "50 of the World's Last Great Places — Destinations of a Lifetime."

Sassafras is a ripe culmination.

At 3,553 feet above sea level, the mountain serves as the state's highest peak, the state border between the Carolinas and the boundary of the Eastern Continental Divide.

Sassafras has been remarkably accessible by car; a hike along the Foothills Trail is glorious but not necessary for the average flatlander.

If only it had been free from a tangle of government, corporate and private land ownership. Trees still block many views. A power company line feeding a metal communication contraption atop the peak frames the horizon.

Recently, wildlife conservationists, state government and Duke Energy have consolidated ownership, opening the way for improvements.

The resolve to realize the potential of Sassafras has built across the spectrum, from local councils to Congress.

"The beauty of Sassafras Mountain is a part of every South Carolinian's heritage, and we want everyone to have a chance to help build this observation tower, from schoolchildren to business executives," said Department of Natural Resources director Alvin Taylor.

This fall Clemson students spent a semester designing the new overlook, which was prefabricated and installed with the help of the Department of Natural Resources, said Dan Harding, a Clemson architecture professor overseeing the project.

"The concept hinged on an idea that used a primary wood structure with a light, sky-blue-painted steel railing designed to leave visitors feeling as if they are floating over a wonderful rock out-cropping while remaining safely contained by the railing, which disappears into the expanding horizon," Harding said.

The creativeness behind the overlook is a precursor to the interpretive design of the observation tower, which, for instance, is planned to straddle the state lines while never touching.

For the tower, the bricks sold to raise funds can be designated in honor or memory of a loved one and will be permanently set in the tower's foundation.

The three brick choices, each containing 23 characters per line: $100 for a 4 x 8 inch brick, with three lines; $500 for an 8 x 8 inch brick, up to six lines; and $1,000 for a 16 x 16 inch brick; up to six lines.

Anyone who wants to contribute without buying a brick can donate online.

For more information on the Sassafras fundraising drive, go to harryhamptonfund.org/sassafras.html or dnr.sc.gov.

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