

The sun sets on the Oconee Passage portion of the Palmetto Trail on Tuesday in Walhalla.

New Palmetto Trail extension a boon

Likely will be boost for state park attendance

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SPECIAL TO INDEPENDENT MAIL

WALHALLA - The extension of the statewide Palmetto Trail to a Walhalla terminus might boost other area state parks as well as the city.

"No doubt it will attract more stewardship-minded folks to the area to enjoy what we have to offer," Rob Achenberg, regional chief for the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, said on Monday to civic group Walhalla Partners for Progress.

The Foothills Trail provided a boon to Oconee State Park, where the trail ends, and "the Palmetto Trail will just add to that," he said.

Along with discussion of the Palmetto Trail's potential impact, Achenberg gave an overview highlighting both the recreational and economic role of Oconee County's

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PHOTOS BY KATIE MCLEAN/ INDEPENDENT

A map marks the end of the Oconee Passage portion of the Palmetto Trail.

Taxes

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states, said Gordon Shuford, an economic researcher for the state.

South Carolina's effective tax rate is 2.99 percent, based on 2012 figures, the most recent studied. That effective rate is far lower than the state's 7 percent top income tax rate.

In 2015, Republican Gov. Nikki Haley, called for a 2 percentage point cut to that rate, saying the 7 percent tax bracket hurt efforts to recruit businesses to the state.

State Rep. Bill Taylor, R-Aiken, said Tuesday the perception that South Carolina has high income taxes hurts when marketing the state to outsiders.

The perception is S.C. residents are taxed at the 7 percent rate, when reality is – after deductions and exemptions – the effective rate is 2.99 percent. But that lower rate is not taken into account, legislators said.

Speaker Pro Tempore Tommy Pope, R-York, agreed, saying when people search for places to live or do business and compare South Carolina's income tax with other states, the 7 percent rate appears high. However, the state's effective tax rate is significantly lower than surrounding states, Pope said.

Still, Pope suggested lowering the top rate to help with the perception issue.

In their presentation to legislators, state budget staffers also noted South Carolina is a comparatively poor state. In 2012, 81.5 percent of S.C. taxpayers reported federal adjusted income of less than $50,000.

Legislators also reviewed the state's 6 percent sales tax rate. Local governments can tack on additional sales taxes for special purposes, including building projects or tourism-related activities. However, the state misses out on about $3 billion a year in revenues because some goods and services are exempt from the sales tax.

In 2012-13, the largest sales tax exemption – $722 million – was on motor fuel, which has its own excise tax. The second largest exemption – $449 million – was on sales of prescription medicines. The third was groceries – $435 million.

Trail

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four state parks — Oconee State Park, the Oconee Station Historic Site, Devil's Fork State Park and Lake Hartwell State Park — the most of any county in South Carolina.

The state parks overall have been moving toward 100 percent self-sufficiency, Achenberg said, and Oconee's parks have moved steadily in that direction, with Devil's Fork State Park more than self-sustaining, producing about 60 percent more revenue that its operating costs.

The county's flagship Oconee State Park, built in the 1930s and looking at some improvements soon to its period-built cabins, is expected to benefit the most from the Palmetto Trail. The park is already 95 percent self-sustaining, according to Achenberg.

It was announced last year that the 350-mile Palmetto Trail is intended to terminate in downtown Walhalla following a 16-mile extension that will run from the present terminus at Oconee Station to take in the Issaqueena Falls area and the Walhalla's Stumphouse Tunnel Park, centered on an uncompleted railroad tunnel started in the 1850s.

Walhalla is currently in the process of applying for state Department of Transportation "C" funds to fund the Palmetto Trail extension in stages.

"C" funds, derived from the state gasoline tax, are earmarked to fund improvements of state roads, county roads, city streets, and other local transportation projects.

Dan Pollock, president of Walhalla Partners for Progress, said Monday that two meetings are planned in September to help resolve issues related to the extension of the Palmetto Trail across U.S. Forest Service lands on its way to the new terminus.

One purpose, said Pollock, will be to elicit public input into the plans and to answer questions to some who may oppose the extension.

"This is Forest Service land," Pollock said. "There may be people who just want it to be left alone to go back to nature."

Adhering to Forest Service protocols for the trail, such as cutting no tree over 3 inches in diameter or making no cuts within 20 feet of a street, offered a sound compromise, said Pollock.

The first meeting is scheduled for 6 p.m. Sept. 27 at the Mountain Rest Community Center off State 28. The second meeting is scheduled for 6 p.m. Sept. 28 at the Salem Community Center.

The meetings will be sponsored by the Palmetto Conservation Foundation.

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