Oconee, Pickens trail projects recommended for funding

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WALHALLA — Two projects that will expand the scope of the Palmetto Trail in Oconee and Pickens counties have been recommended for grant funding, it was announced Monday.

In Oconee, a 1.5-mile section, which will anchor a trail system for biking and hiking planned for Walhalla city property, was one of two new sections recommended for funding through the Recreational Trails Program.

In Pickens County, meanwhile, the section recommended for grant funding will add approximately four miles toward completing the link between Keowee-Toxaway State Park and Table Rock State Park.

The two construction projects are part of the Palmetto Conservation Foundation's "Finish the Trail" campaign, according to a news release from the PCF on Monday.

The South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism administers the RTP for the Federal Highway Administration, and RTP grants are distributed through a competitive application process.

"We were thrilled to learn these two important Palmetto Trail projects were recommended for funding," PCF executive director Natalie Britt said in a news release. "We are incredibly grateful for the overwhelming support for trail development in the region. The city of Walhalla, Oconee County and Pickens County have been exceptional partners in moving the mission of the Palmetto Trail forward."

The new section of Palmetto Trail in Oconee is part of a 16-mile extension from Oconee Station State Historic Site into downtown Walhalla, the trail's western terminus. Stumphouse Tunnel and Issaqueena Falls are adjacent to the site.

"There is no question that countless communities across America are experiencing an economic revitalization due in whole or in part to trails and greenways," Britt said.

PCF is working with Walhalla's mayor and council, chamber of commerce, Upstate Forever and Partners for Progress to create the mountain-biking park for beginner through advanced riders.

For Walhalla, the Palmetto Trail is viewed as an exceptional opportunity to increase tourism, stimulate economic development and provide a fun recreational venue with potential impact on local public health.

"Walhalla is now poised to take advantage of and support all the opportunities that will come from the extension of the Palmetto Trail through our Stumphouse Tunnel property into our downtown," Mayor Danny Edwards said.

Edwards noted that the city recently completed its downtown streetscape renovation and funded development of a master plan for the downtown area surrounding the path of the trail.

"This will allow us to maximize its benefits, not only for visitors, but also for our local community members, by creating more outdoor activity and event venues," Edwards said. "Helping improve the quality of life for our local citizens is an important benefit of the Palmetto Trail coming to our downtown. Our folks will be able to walk, hike and bike safely."

In Pickens County, the new section of Palmetto Trail will follow the lower reach of Eastatoe Creek through Jocassee Gorges from the fishing access on Roy F. Jones Highway to Keowee-Toxaway State Park.

The section is part of the larger plan for the Palmetto Trail to connect state parks in the Upstate: Croft, Jones Gap, Caesars Head, Table Rock, Keowee-Toxaway, Devil's Fork, Oconee and Oconee Station.

PCF is partnering with the Department of Natural Resources, Naturaland Trust and Keowee-Toxaway State Park to create this trail section.

The Palmetto Trail is the longest trail and the largest trail construction project in South Carolina, with approximately 360 miles completed and another 140 miles planned.

From the Blue Ridge Mountains to the Intracoastal Waterway, the Trail covers 14 counties — Oconee, Pickens, Greenville, Spartanburg, Union, Laurens, Newberry, Fairfield, Richland, Sumter, Clarendon, Orangeburg, Berkeley and Charleston.

Britt told a group gathered for a business forum in Oconee last year she estimates the trail to be completed in the next five to eight years.

"What's fantastic about the Palmetto Trail is it tells the story of South Carolina like no other singular project," she said. "We currently go through three Revolutionary War battlefields, we go through several national forests — and what makes it unique is it has something for everybody.

"It is a 'through' hiking trail," so a lot of people compare it to the Appalachian Trail, but what I like about this is we go through downtowns, we go through Landrum, we go through the city of Columbia, we have rail-trail conversions that are actually paved (and) we have bike share programs.

"When you get into the Upstate, you're going to get some quad-burning, tough hiking. Down in the Lowcountry, you get views of the Intracoastal Waterway. So the trail gets used a ton."

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