Palmetto Trail touted as big boost to tourism



CARLOS GALARZA-VEVE | THE JOURNAL

State Sen. Thomas Alexander stands at the podium to express his support for plans announced at The Depot in Walhalla on Tuesday for a new extension of the Palmetto Trail into downtown Walhalla. Standing with Alexander are, from left, Walhalla Chamber of Commerce president Darlene Greene, Palmetto Conservation Foundation executive director Natalie Britt and Walhalla mayor Danny Edwards.

BY CARLOS GALARZA-VEVE
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — The Palmetto Trail is coming to downtown Walhalla, and everyone involved in making it happen agrees it has the potential to dramatically benefit tourism throughout Oconee County.

Palmetto Conservation Foundation executive director Natalie Britt presented Walhalla mayor Danny Edwards on Tuesday with a Palmetto Trail kiosk poster illustrating the planned downtown terminus that connects the city to more than 350 miles of bike ways and hiking trails stretching from

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Falls off S.C. Highway 28.

"The economic impact of the Palmetto Trail on Walhalla and Oconee County will be significant," Alexander said. "Through the public-private partnerships created with this project, the area will experience increased business development and tourism. In addition, this is an opportunity for increased awareness of healthy lifestyle choices and improved quality-of-life initiatives for our county residents."

When fully completed, Alexander said the Palmetto Trail will span the state with more than 500 miles of trail for hiking and biking enthusiasts of all ages.

Prior to the official announcement, Edwards told The Journal the Palmetto Trail's expansion into Walhalla has the potential of having the type of impact the Greenville Health System's Swamp Rabbit Trail has had in Greenville County.

The Swamp Rabbit Trail runs along the Reedy River, connecting Greenville County with schools, parks and local businesses.

In 2014 alone, the Swamp Rabbit Trail attracted more than 500,000 visitors to the Travelers Rest area and brought approximately $6.7 million in tourism revenue.

"When you look at that and what our possibilities could be, I'm just blown away," Edwards said. "This is not just going to be a big deal for Walhalla, it's going to be a big deal for the entire county. Everybody's going to benefit."

Tom Markovich, one of the principals negotiating with the county to acquire and turn the abandoned former Oconee County Courthouse in downtown Walhalla into a boutique hotel, said he's excited about the Palmetto Trail expansion. He said having a hotel downtown would make Walhalla all the more attractive as a destination area.

"People who do biking and hiking will probably end up there," Markovich said. "They can stay in Walhalla, relax, and they'll have a place to do that."

Dan Pollock, president of Walhalla's Partners for Progress and a longtime promoter of optimizing the benefits of the Stumphouse Tunnel and Issaqueena Falls attractions to draw visitors to the city, said the partnership with the Palmetto Conservation Foundation comes after "a lot of negotiations."

"We got together and said, 'You know what, we've both got something together we want,'" Pollock said.

Britt said the foundation's board is "delighted" to partner with Walhalla to extend the trail.

"Our board of directors agrees that ending the trail in a beautiful, thriving community provides countless benefits to the region and to the trail users," Britt said.

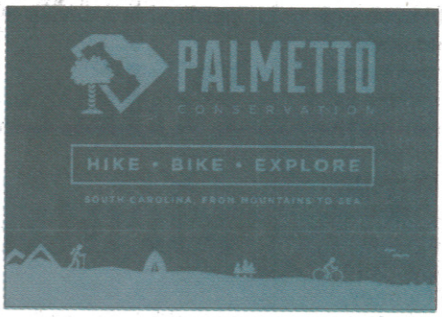
Edwards called it a "win-win for everyone."

"The city of Walhalla was already focused on making the downtown area more pedestrian-friendly as part of the streetscape renovation project currently underway," Edwards said. "Those plans will be extended to ensure that Walhalla and the surrounding area is bike-friendly as well."

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...State Sen. Thomas Alexander, ...ho represents Oconee and part of Pickens County, joined in embracing plans to expand the Palmetto Trail's presence in Oconee County.



The trail already has a 3.2-mile footprint at Oconee Station Historic Site. The extension is expected to add about 16 more miles encompassing the areas of Stumphouse Tunnel and Issaqueena

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