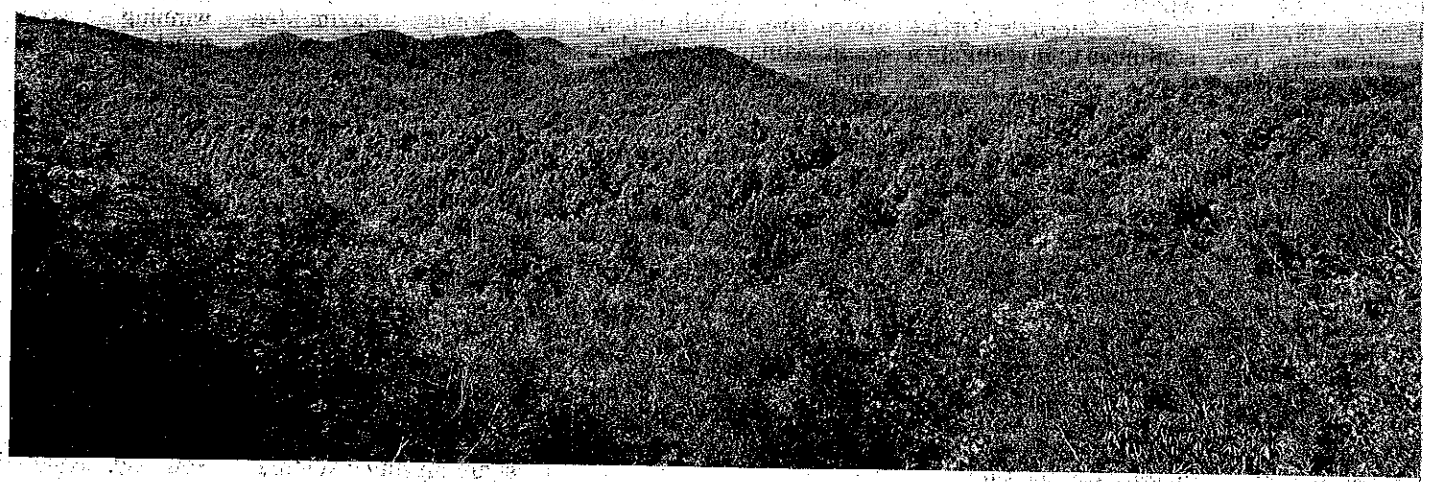
# SASSAFRAS MOUNTAIN OVERLOOK MOVES FORWARD



MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/STAFF

**The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources will soon build an observation platform on the summit of Sassafras Mountain, South Carolina's highest peak, thanks to a $350,000 donation from Duke Energy.**

## $350,000 from Duke will enable Department of Natural Resources to draw up plans

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PICKENS — Legions of hikers and state "highpointers" have had the vision for years that if you build an overlook on Sassafras Mountain, the curious will come.

Now, it looks like the idea for an accessible observation platform straddling the North Carolina-South Carolina border is on its way, thanks to a $350,000 gift from Duke Energy to the S.C. Department of Natural Resources this past week.

The department will be able start drawing up plans and moving dirt for building a new observation platform at the summit of Sassafras Mountain, the highest peak in South Carolina, which sits at 3,553 feet elevation.

Along with fund-raising efforts such as the sale of brick pavers among several groups, including the Foothills Trail Conference, Pickens County, Clemson University, the Conservation Fund, the Harry Hampton Memorial Wildlife Fund, the state Department of Natural Resources has $500,000, about half of what is needed for the complete project, but enough to begin construction, said Greg Lucas, department spokesman.

Work on the platform is expected to begin this summer and take about six months to complete. Other amenities, including restrooms, a picnic area and an upgraded trail to the platform, will require more fund-raising, Lucas said.

Architectural renderings are drawn, modeled partly on the handicap-accessible observation platform at Mount Mitchell State Park in North Carolina's Yancey County, about 30 miles northeast of Asheville, Lucas said. Formal plans will go out to bid soon.

Heyward Douglass, executive director of the Foothills Trail Conference, the nonprofit that oversees the 77-mile-long Foothills Trail that runs along the Carolinas border and splices Sassafras Mountain, said it is an exciting and long-awaited moment for outdoors enthusiasts, as well as those in tourism.

> ***"Sassafras Mountain is a special natural asset, and this project fits right in with our mission of environmental stewardship."***
> **CLARK GILLESPY,** South Carolina president of Duke Energy

"The Foothills Trail goes right smack dab over the top of Sassafras," Douglass said. "It starts out of Table Rock State Park, 9 miles away, crosses over the top of Sassafras and down, and connects to Oconee State Park. We're so thrilled to have a scenic spot that's always been a part of the Foothills Trail."

The mountain in northern Pickens County — midway between Rosman, N.C., and Pickens — sits on land managed by the S.C. Department of Natural Resources. Officially known as the Jim Timmerman Natural Resources Area at Jocassee Gorges, Lucas said it is more commonly referred to as Jocassee Gorges.

It is part of the land sold in 2010 by former U.S. Rep. Charles Taylor of North Carolina to the Conservation Fund as part of a landmark 8,000-acre, $33 million conservation sale spilling over the state line. The land trust then donated the land to the S.C. Department of Natural Resources. On the North Carolina side, the N.C. Forest Service is working with the Conservation Fund, the Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy and other partners to create the new Headwaters State Forest.

Sassafras Mountain is also on the Eastern Continental Divide. It is the separation point for three distinct watersheds — two watersheds drain into the Atlantic Ocean and another travels to the Gulf of Mexico.

The land was acquired by the state in the late 1990s and has been open as public hunting land and recreation land since then, Lucas said. There was once a fire tower on the peak, but it was dismantled many years ago, and although once cleared of trees, the summit had overgrown

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# OVERLOOK

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in the past half century.

The iconic status of Sassafras as the highest point in South Carolina has been known for decades, Heyward said, but it has been a place hard to reach, especially for those in the Highpointers Club, a national group of hikers that attempt to reach the highest point in each of the 50 states.

Pickens County paid for the paving of the 4.5-mile U.S. 178 stretch leading out of Rocky Bottom to just below the summit, where people have been able to park and scout around for where they think the summit is.

Last summer, the S.C. natural resources, working with conservation groups, took down 3 acres of trees at the peak in anticipation of the observation deck.

"It's going to be done in phases. The total will be over $1 million. We're hoping Duke Energy's very gracious donation will help spur other corporate entities to donate other funds," Lucas said. "The platform will be barrier-free, so folks who are mobility impaired will be able to access it.

"Mount Mitchell has been mentioned as the standard, something simple and attractive."

"Sassafras Mountain is a special natural asset, and this project fits right in with our mission of environmental stewardship," Clark Gillespy, South Carolina president of Duke Energy, said in a statement. "Partnerships like this ensure that the natural beauty and wonders of South Carolina are protected and shared with generations to come."

Funding for the Sassafras Mountain project was committed as part of the re-licensing agreement for Duke Energy's Keowee-Toxaway Hydroelectric Project, which includes the hydroelectric stations at lakes Keowee and Jocassee.

Douglass said the new platform will serve many functions: a notch in the belt for the Highpointers; a starting, ending or resting point for those traversing the Foothills Trail; another destination of note for South Carolina's tourism office, maybe even in time for fall foliage season; and another place to stop and wonder at the region's natural beauty.

"The sunsets from there are incredible," Douglass said. "Some were not happy about taking trees down, but a whole lot more are thrilled and amazed at the views you can now see all around. It's just spectacular."