Supporters celebrate Stumphouse preservation

BY MIKAYLA KREUZBERGER
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WALHALLA — Supporters and friends of the Stumphouse Tunnel will gather Saturday at the historic property to celebrate its preservation.

The third biannual Celebrate Stumphouse picnic begins at noon, and lunch is served at 1 p.m. Officials said paper products, cups and utensils will be on hand, but parties should bring picnic lunches.

"There'll be plenty of food. If you come by yourself, maybe just pick up a few 2-liter drinks," said J. Harold Thomas, a leader of the Stumphouse preservation effort.

The focus of the celebration, which occurs every other year on an odd year, is the fact that the tunnel and surrounding 1,000 acres are preserved forever, Thomas said.

The property includes the legendary Issaqueena Falls and three tunnels — Stumphouse, Middle and Saddle, which were to be connected in an effort to create a rail system from Charleston to Knoxville, Tenn., in the mid-1800s.

Massive efforts were made to finish the tunnel project, but financing ran dry prior to the Civil War, and the war ultimately depleted the tunnel of workers and money.

Today, the tunnel and the falls are both local monuments that visitors can walk to.

In 2007, the area was in danger of being sold by the City of Walhalla to a Florida developer and turned into a gated community.

Thomas and several citizens formed the Concerned Citizens for Conservation (CCC) group and began a campaign that eventually stopped plans for development.

"We planned a strategy and sent around petitions and got a lot of names," Thomas said.

The Florida developer withdrew his offer, and the city agreed to sell its 450 acres for $1.2 million, which was funded by the S.C. Conservation Bank.

In addition, the CCC received enough donations from private citizens and county and state organizations to purchase the adjoining 500 acres, including Middle and Saddle tunnels, from private landowners.

"In seven months, we raised $4.3 million, including the $1.2 million provided by the state's Conservation Bank," Thomas said. "We received so many donations from all over, including birthday money from a small girl in Washington who saw us on the news and wanted to help.

That land was placed into a permanent conservation easement, although the City of Walhalla currently owns and maintains the upkeep of the falls, parking, facilities and a small reservoir above the falls.

"We are very indebted to Walhalla for placing their land in the conservation easement," Thomas said.

He expects more than 200 people at Saturday's picnic, including Walhalla Mayor Danny Edwards.

Stumphouse Tunnel is a few miles north of Walhalla on S.C. Hwy. 28.

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J. Harold Thomas
Concerned Citizens for Conservation member

Visitors walk into Stumphouse Tunnel on a summer day. The third biannual Celebrate Stumphouse picnic is scheduled for noon Saturday at the site.