

Palmetto Trail extension expected to open by March

BY JUSTIN LEE CAMPBELL
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WALHALLA — The public is expected to have access to the Palmetto Trail at Stumphouse Tunnel Park by March, according to Natalie Britt, executive director of the Palmetto Conservation Foundation.

Britt said about 2 miles of the 500-mile-long trail are scheduled to be completed next spring in Phase I of the Palmetto Trail and Stumphouse Tunnel Trail system in Walhalla. The extension creates a new starting point in a mountains-to-sea hiking and biking trail traversing the state from Awendaw in Charleston County to Walhalla.

"Building a trail is a comprehensive process to do it right," Britt said. "To go from a prospective timeline to building a trail is impressive. That's a testament to the overwhelming partnerships and support."

Deno Contos, owner of project overseer Benchmark Trails, said the Palmetto Conservation Corps cleared about 1.5 miles of trail at Stumphouse last week before taking a holiday break from the work this week.

The Palmetto Conservation Foundation, Oconee County Chamber of Commerce and city of Walhalla will show off the progress on the trail Nov. 28, according to a news release provided by the

foundation.

Britt, Contos, Walhalla Mayor Danny Edwards, Walhalla city administrator Brent Taylor and chamber president-elect Darlene Greene plan to attend the event at the picnic shelter near the parking lot, according to the news release.

Greene said all the partners are "incredibly excited" about the work on the extension, which officially began on Nov. 6. Greene said the turnaround from announcing the extension in July 2015 to turning dirt was impressive.

"I really and truly believe in my heart the extension is going to be a wonderful opportunity for all kinds of good things across Oconee County to come to fruition," she said. "I think it's going to be a great thing county-wide, and I think a lot of people are going to see a positive impact from it."

The passage is the first part of a 16-mile extension of the Palmetto Trail from Oconee Station State Historic Site into downtown Walhalla, according to the news release. City officials, the chamber and the foundation hope it will make Walhalla a regional destination.

"The Palmetto Trail will become the spine for a state-of-the-art mountain biking trail system for beginners to advanced riders and enhance the park's current system of hiking trails," the news release said.

The Journal reported in July 2015 Palmetto Conservation Foundation officials announced plans for the extension to encompass the mountain



areas on S.C. Highway 28 into Stumphouse Tunnel Park and Issaqueena Falls and end at Kaufmann Square Park in downtown Walhalla.

Walhalla City Council unanimously passed a motion in August 2016 endorsing plans for the extension proposed by architect Blake Sanders of Alta Planning and Design. Councilman Tjay Bagwell said at the time the endorsement was the "next logical step" in making the trail happen.

More than a year later, Edwards said the arrival of the Palmetto Trail

in Walhalla is "definitely an important event" for the city. He said the trail extension will bring people and money to the city's restaurants and retailers.

"(The trail) also shows what can happen when everyone works together," he said in an email.

Edwards said Walhalla Partners for Progress, city officials, the chamber, the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, S.C. State Park Service and U.S. Forest Service "really worked" with the Palmetto Conservation Foundation to make the extension happen.

"It's always easier to say 'why' instead of 'why not,'" Edwards added. "It's been a long road, but it will be well worth the effort when it's finished."

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