

First miles of Palmetto Trail expected to be completed in April



Pictured from left, Paul Cain, Natalie Britt, Darlene Greene, Bill Whitmire, Mayor Danny Edwards, Deno Contos, Brent Taylor and Phil Shirley participate in November's ground-breaking ceremony for the Walhalla terminus of the Palmetto Trail. Britt said the first section of the trail will likely be completed by April.

BY JASON EVANS
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — Barring weather issues, officials working on the Walhalla passage of the Palmetto Trail hope to have the first few miles of trail open for use by April.

Walhalla will be the Upstate terminus of the trail.

Oconee County Chamber members received an update on the trail's progress at a recent Business After Hours meeting.

"We project that the first three miles will be complete sometime before April 2018," Palmetto Conservation Foundation executive director Natalie Britt said Wednesday.

Britt said the Palmetto Trail will give people access to the outdoors from Walhalla all the way to Awendaw in Charleston County.

When complete, the Palmetto Trail will be one of only 16 cross-state trails in the country, she said.

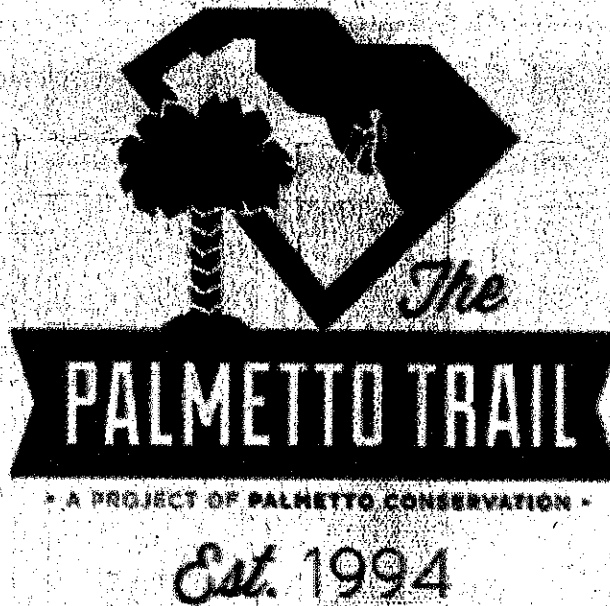
The trail will appeal to users of all ages and abilities. The shortest piece of the trail is 1.3 miles, while the longest passage is 47 miles. It offers "very easy to very strenuous" hiking, Britt said.

"It tells the story of South Carolina in an incredibly beautiful way," she added.

The trail will connect state and county parks, traverse Revolutionary War battlefields and Native American pathways, and take users through mountains and swamps and down to the sea.

When completed, the Palmetto Trail will be 500 miles long.

Britt said 380 miles of the trail are complete so far.



The foundation and its many local partners are working to not only build the thru-hiking piece of the Palmetto Trail at Stumphouse Tunnel Park but to create "a destination mountain bike park," she said.

The park will offer 14 miles of mountain biking trails, from beginner trails to very advanced trails, Britt said.

The Recreational Trails Program provided the initial seed money in the form of a \$100,000 grant, Britt said. The City of Walhalla provided a required \$20,000 match.

The Palmetto Conservation Foundation contributed another \$30,000 to the project, Britt said.

In-kind labor was used to help prep the trail areas for the professional builders.

Young people working with the Palmetto Conservation Corps, part of the Americorps program, spent six weeks prepping the corri-

dor, Britt said.

Benchmark Trails has been hired for final trail construction.

Britt added that creating trails with minimal environmental impact is the goal.

"We want to make sure we're developing the most sustainable trails that we can, so that they last for generations," she said.

The portion of trail expected to be completed this spring will include 1.5 miles of the thru-hiking system of the Palmetto Trail and 1.5 miles of beginner mountain biking looping trail, she said.

"Hopefully, depending on grants and fundraising, we will start later this year on phase two," Britt said.

Phase two will add an additional six miles to the system. Britt said the goal is to have a little more than nine miles of trail completed by 2019.

"It could be sooner," she

said. "We never expected Hurricane Irma to have the impact on the Upstate that it did."

A recent Outdoor Alliance study of the Nantahala and Pisgah national forests showed that mountain biking tourism there supported 366 full-time jobs in North Carolina, Britt said.

Officials hope the trail-head and park will be a boon to Walhalla.

"What makes this system so unique is its close proximity to a great downtown," Britt said. "We're going to be pushing for people to go and explore and take advantage of all that Walhalla has to offer."

Oconee County Chamber of Commerce director Vanessa Penton said the trail will bring new businesses to the area.

"We can't even begin to grasp the opportunities that are ahead of us, the opportunities that this trail is going to offer for new businesses," she said.

Penton believes business people will be moved to fill needs within the area as the Palmetto Trail brings visitors to the area.

"We need hotels," she said. "I believe the need for a hotel will be met sooner rather than later."

Trail projects such as the Swamp Rabbit Trail in Greenville County and the Doodle Trail in Easley have spurred growth in those areas.

"We don't want to be a Greenville," Penton said. "We want to be the best version of Oconee County that we can be."