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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 16, 2025

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Lake Whelchel Trail Expansion & New Trailhead Increases Outdoor Recreation Opportunities in Cherokee County

Cherokee County, S.C. – Cherokee County is poised to open 2.5 miles of natural surface trail, and a new trailhead and parking area at Lake Whelchel. The trail expansion brings the total mileage available for walking, hiking and mountain biking at the lake to approximately 10 miles and adds 42 parking spaces for trail access at the new trailhead on Pleasant School Road. The opening brings Cherokee County's total trail mileage to 19 miles and one step closer to the long-term goal of having a 35-mile multiuse trail from the City of Chesnee to Kings Mountain National Military Park. The official opening of the 2.5 miles of new trail and facilities at Lake Whelchel will take place at 4 PM, Thursday, May 1 at the trailhead on Pleasant School Road.

The project was made possible by a \$98,000 Recreational Trails Program (RTP) grant from the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism (SCPRT) received by Cherokee County in 2023. The county supplied matching funds as well as personnel and equipment to help complete the project. The trail is on property owned by the Gaffney Board of Public Works (GBPW) who are fully supportive of the project to provide Cherokee County residents and visitors greater access to nature.

The Lake Whelchel trail is a component of two regional trail networks: the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail (OVVI) and the Carolina Thread Trail (CTT). The OVVI is one of 21 congressionally designated national historic trails and was established in 1980 as the first national historic trail east of the Mississippi. Approximately 35 miles of the historic trail corridor traverses Cherokee County as it extends from the City of Chesnee to its terminus at Kings Mountain National Military Park. It commemorates the route of patriot militia in their pursuit of Major Patrick Ferguson and the loyalist militia under his command. They met at Kings Mountain, where the patriots defeated Major Ferguson's loyalist forces in a battle that shifted the momentum of the American Revolution. "The Overmountain Victory Trail is an awesome

collaborative space that is continuing to grow, allowing us to connect our history and our communities, to celebrate our past and prepare for our future. As we did in 1780, we again come together to work towards a common cause. That is one of the great messages we can learn from this story,” according to OVVI Superintendent Jeffrey Ellison.

The CTT is a part of the Catawba Lands Conservancy (CLC), a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization which advocates and supports the development of greenways, trails, and blueways across 15 counties in North and South Carolina. Its mission is to save land and connect lives to nature. “Cherokee County continues to demonstrate what can be accomplished when strong partnerships are formed and progress is made together. The new 2.5 miles of trail and trailhead area are an example of just that. We can’t wait to see the community enjoying these great facilities to promote healthier lives and economies for our region,” said Ashton Lamb, Community Coordinator for CLC and CTT.

The Overmountain Victory Trail/Carolina Thread Trail (OVT/CTT) Steering Committee selected Canopy Trails to construct the trail and work began in early September 2024. A major challenge came when Hurricane Helene hit the area at the end of September, taking down numerous large trees on the peninsula where the trail was being constructed. Volunteers from the Upstate Chapter of the Southern Off-Road Bicycle Association (SORBA) played a critical role in clearing dozens of trees and debris to ensure that the trail construction was completed.

Cooperation among numerous organizations and volunteers was key to the successful completion of the project. “All involved see the importance of the trail to Cherokee County as well as its significance to the region as part of the OVVI and CTT networks. We all get to share in preserving history, enjoying the outdoors, and promoting the local economy,” according to Paul LeFrancois, Chair of the OVT/CTT Steering Committee.