Comprehensive Plan

Executive Summary
Beaufort County
South Carolina
Preserve the Natural Beauty of Beaufort County

Preserving and protecting the natural environment is a principal concern of Beaufort County residents. What is surprising to many residents is the fact that land well removed from shoreline still has a direct impact on the water quality found many miles downstream.

Preserving water quality in Beaufort County should be our number one priority. More than half of the County is covered by tidal wetlands, estuaries or open waters. Already, these waters are threatened by pollution. Sections of Broad Creek and the New River are closed to shellfish harvesting due to a significant increase in fecal coliform. Many other creeks and rivers suffer negative impacts due to urban, agricultural and timbering runoff.

These waterways are not only what give the County its sense of place, but they are also the home of one of our oldest and most important industries. Protecting the environment is key to protecting our economy.

To achieve the vision of preserving, protecting and enhancing the natural environment and fisheries, Beaufort County must:

- Maintain the pristine waterways of the region.
- Maintain the quality of surface waters.
- Maintain the quality of wetlands.
- Manage fish and shellfish resources.
- Protect the quality and quantity of groundwater resources.
- Identify and protect areas of ecological significance.
- Conserve open space.

The Comprehensive Plan recommends that the following actions be taken to prevent future damage to the natural environment:

- Require a vegetative buffer along all waterways and tidal wetlands of the County which:
  - provides effective flood control.
  - protects the land from waterway erosion.
  - removes sediment and manmade pollutants before they reach the water.
  - provides habitat for wildlife.

- Implement integrated stormwater management program.

- Reduce the amount of "impervious surfaces," such as roads, driveways, sidewalks and rooftops, which increase stormwater runoff. 

Create New Industries & Jobs to Keep Our Economy Strong

Since adopting the Comprehensive Plan in 1997, Beaufort County has participated in the creation of the public-private Greater Beaufort-Hilton Head Economic Partnership and has provided support that has successfully converted the University of South Carolina Beaufort from a two-year university to a four-year university. Both of these steps are essential to form successful economic diversification. Additionally, Beaufort County has begun to measure success in achieving economic diversity and will continue to develop tools to measure our success. Beaufort County will continue to support economic diversity that will improve the quality of citizens' lives and provide economic opportunity by enacting policies and procedures to position Beaufort County to take advantage of all available opportunities. With this update of the Comprehensive Plan, it is time to build on the progress to date.

The first step is the adoption of a new vision:

All residents of Beaufort County will have the opportunity to realize their economic potential.

To achieve this vision, the Comprehensive Plan establishes the following economic goals:

1. Continue support of the Greater Beaufort-Hilton Head Economic Partnership, Inc. (the "Partnership") and its assigned mission as Beaufort County's designated representative to increase economic opportunities for Beaufort County residents.

2. Support economic diversity by implementing policies and procedures recommended by the Partnership to improve Beaufort County's capacity to compete for higher-wage jobs that will benefit its citizens.

3. Cooperate with the Private Sector to support existing businesses and attract new businesses that pay wages above the Beaufort County average.

4. Periodically review policies and procedures and delineate a clear work plan to guide the modification of these policies and procedures to ensure that they support the objective of economic diversity and increased wage rates for its citizens.

5. Cooperate with the Partnership to lead the development of regional economic development strategies with the surrounding counties and the Lowcountry Council of Governments.

6. Support the creation of conditions that allow, and programs that enable, the expansion of employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for citizens.

7. Support economic growth that will increase Beaufort County's total business property tax base to support essential County services.

8. Continue to encourage increased cooperation among all municipalities and areas within Beaufort County.
9. Continue to encourage improved public, higher and vocational education and training opportunities to assist citizens in securing higher-wage jobs.

10. Encourage and assist the Partnership’s efforts to be fiscally self-sufficient.

11. Support the Partnership to continue its emphasis on expanding and attracting businesses that are compatible with and appreciative of Beaufort County’s outstanding quality of life with emphasis on value-added business as the Partnership’s priority. Some examples of value-added businesses appreciative of our quality of life include software development, consulting, medical, light manufacturing, light assembly, fabrication, warehousing and distribution, and satellite office facilities.

12. Support the Partnership’s effort to improve the relationship with the South Carolina Department of Commerce and other State agencies, appropriate Federal and international agencies, and organizations directly involved in profit-seeking capital investment.

13. Support the Partnership’s efforts to expand opportunities to involve Beaufort County’s Federal and State elected delegations in encouraging increased economic opportunities for Beaufort County citizens.

14. Enable the Partnership to compete effectively by authorizing the Partnership to utilize economic development tools and incentives commonly used by competing communities. Examples of these incentives would include but not be limited to designating certain parcels of property as being “multi-county business parks” so that businesses located in these areas could take advantage of State and Federal incentives at no expense to Beaufort County taxpayers; delegating authority for use of unused water and sewer capacity available to Beaufort County for economic development; and creation of a “fast track” process for reviewing building permits for appropriate economic opportunities.

15. Receive from the Partnership, at least annually, a “State of the Economy in Beaufort County” report.

The Plan seeks cooperative ventures with the State of South Carolina, Jasper County, and the Federal Government to find new ways to finance road construction and improvement projects, in an effort to ease the tax burden on Beaufort County residents.

This plan will deliver the following benefits for the citizens of Beaufort County:

• Safer and more convenient access to main roads from new developments.
• Swifter and safer hurricane evacuations.
• Safer and more convenient commutes for workers.
• Sufficient long-term highway capacity during peak tourism seasons.

In addition to specific roadway upgrades, beginning with major highways and roads in Priority Investment Areas, the Comprehensive Plan recommends:

• A regional transportation planning process be established in cooperation with the County’s municipalities and surrounding counties to examine the transportation system as a whole.
• Computer modeling software called TRAPLANT be used to determine the impact of new commercial and residential developments on regional roadway capacity.
• Alternative modes of travel such as bus service, light rail, water taxis, ferry service, ride-sharing, bikeways and walking trails be identified and developed.
• The scenic quality of the County’s roadways be protected and enhanced.

Preserve Our Rich Cultural Heritage

Beaufort County’s attractiveness as a place to live and work, as a destination for visitors, and consequently its economic well-being are directly related to its historic character and unique quality of life. The County has a diverse wealth of historic resources including:

• Two of the three National Historic Landmark Districts in South Carolina: the Beaufort Historic District and Penn Center.
• 56 properties and districts listed in the National Register of Historic Places.
• Hundreds of other buildings and sites of historic and architectural importance.
• Gullah culture.

In 1996, The City of Beaufort, Town of Port Royal, and Beaufort County were awarded a matching grant from the South Carolina Department of Archives and History to survey the County and identify our cultural resources. The entire County, with the exception of Hilton Head Island, the military installations at Beaufort Island and the Marine Corps Air Station, and the town of Bluffton (which was surveyed in 1994), has now been surveyed.

To preserve the cultural landscape of Beaufort County for future generations, the Comprehensive Plan recommends the following actions that stem from the 1996 survey data:

• Establish a system to evaluate and designate historic resources for future preservation planning.
• Evaluate Beaufort County roads and work with the South Carolina Department of Transportation to designate any eligible road as a South Carolina Scenic Highway.
• Monitor all development and require archaeological surveys when appropriate.
• Revise and update the Beaufort County Historic Preservation Ordinance to create a register for sites of local historic significance.
• Enforce the Beaufort County Archaeological and Historic Impact Assessment Ordinance.
• Expand efforts to involve the public in historic preservation through education.
• Maintain the historic character of the Beaufort National Historic Landmark District.
• Work with the County Emergency Management Department and Building Codes to develop a plan for protecting historic resources both during and after a natural disaster.
• Establish a special Cultural Protection Overlay District on St. Helena Island.

Build Better Roads & Encourage Two-Wheeled & Two-Footed Travel

The main roads of Beaufort County are already carrying more cars every day than they were built to handle, causing traffic jams and safety problems for County residents.

Building new roads is expensive or impossible because large areas of the County are covered by water or marshland. The shortest distance between two points is never a straight line in Beaufort County.

Building new and better roads is important, but these construction projects must be well planned to prevent sharp tax increases and damage to the environment. Citizens have often rejected tax increases for road improvements. Thus, good planning is the only option.

Additionally, commercial and residential access to main roads must be carefully managed in the future to discourage increasing urban sprawl and bigger traffic jams.

Every effort should be made to build bike ways and pedestrian walkways into future road plans so that not every trip has to be by car.

The recommendations of the Lowcountry Regional Transit Authority should also be considered to enable commuters who cannot afford cars to have access to efficient, low-cost transportation so and from work.

The Beaufort County Comprehensive Plan seeks to implement a roadway improvement program that will:

• Make streets safer.
• Make it easier to get from Point A to Point B.
• Preserve the fragile environment of Beaufort County.
• Encourage smart development that controls road access and reduces traffic jams.
Beaufort County

Future Land Use

Adopted August 23, 1999

Legend

- Priority Investment Areas
- Rural Investment Areas
- Designated Commercial
- State Route Areas
- Existing Planned Unit Development

Priority Investment Areas

- Priority investment areas are areas within the County that are likely to be developed for use in the future. Priority investment areas are designated for commercial investment based on the County's economic and social development priorities.

Rural Investment Areas

- Rural investment areas are areas that are designated for rural development and are intended to maintain the rural character of the County.

Designated Commercial

- Designated commercial areas are areas that are designated for commercial development.

State Route Areas

- State route areas are areas that are designated for state route development.

Existing Planned Unit Development

- Existing planned unit development areas are areas that are designated for future development based on existing planned unit developments.

The Comprehensive Plan includes:

- A designation of future development areas that are likely to be developed for use in the future.
- Priority investment areas are designated for commercial investment based on the County's economic and social development priorities.

The plan is intended to guide future development and ensure that development is consistent with the County's goals and priorities.
Create Parks and Preserve Open Spaces

The natural environment of Beaufort County should enhance the physical well-being of her citizens.

The Comprehensive Plan will ensure that:

- Existing park land is developed to provide a complete range of recreational facilities.
- New parks are constructed to meet the demands of our growing population.
- New and enhanced recreational activities are made available for all citizens.
- Pristine open spaces are preserved.

The Plan recommends the following actions:

- Develop the Burton Wells Park on Port Royal Island to include a recreation center, a wildlife preserve, operations, security and maintenance; and support facilities and services.
- Improve and maintain each of the County's municipal parks, County recreational facilities and school playgrounds, which include:
  - 40 parks and facilities
  - 30 ball fields
  - 4 gyms
  - 8 community centers
  - 2 arts centers
  - 15 tennis courts
- Develop the Buckwalter Park in southern Beaufort County.
- Preserve greenways—natural areas that often follow linear landscape features such as rivers, trail systems, streams, highlands or even abandoned railroads—to help protect waterways, wetlands and wildlife.
- Aggressively seek alternative funding sources for parks and recreational activities.
- Develop an additional 13 community parks and seven neighborhood parks to meet current needs.

Provide Public Services Without Breaking the Bank

Our growing community needs safe roads, clean water, fire protection and other public services. Proper planning will ensure that these services are available and that we can pay for them without big tax increases.

Public facilities to support growth include:

- Water treatment and distribution.
- Sewer systems and wastewater treatment.
- Solid waste collection and disposal.
- Fire protection and law enforcement.
- Emergency medical services.
- General government facilities.
- Schools and libraries.
- Emergency evacuation.

The Comprehensive Plan will save money for Beaufort County taxpayers by ensuring that:

- Growth is encouraged in areas that already have the proper public services.
- New infrastructure is constructed where it is most appropriate.
- Duplication of certain public services is eliminated.
- All citizens have equal access to fire, emergency medical and law enforcement protection.
- Schools and libraries are constructed and improved.
- The natural environment is preserved.

Ensure Affordable Housing for All Beaufort County Residents

The rapid growth of the County and influx of wealthy second homeowners and retirees is driving up the cost of housing and restricting the ability for many residents to afford homes near where they work.

Lower-paid workers are finding it necessary to live farther and farther from work; more than 600 members of the military and their families are on waiting lists for on-base housing; and the rural poor are often unable to afford decent housing.

Losing any of these population groups would severely cripple Beaufort County's economy. The tourism industry could not function without service workers; the military payroll accounts for one-third of the County's total annual payroll; and the rural poor, living for generations in family compounds, represent the history and diversity of the County and should not be displaced.

The need for affordable housing is an issue that must be addressed before this housing shortage seriously weakens the area's economic base.

The residential real estate market is very strong, and there is no market-driven incentive to build affordable housing. Mobile homes currently represent a significant amount of "affordable housing" in the County. Compared to other examples of affordable housing, such as apartments, townhouses and bungalows, mobile homes:

- Experience rapid depreciation, which prevents the owners from gaining equity over time.
- Offer poor protection from hurricanes or severe storms.
- Have higher than average vacancy rates.
- Rely on septic systems that can pollute our groundwater if not properly maintained.