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July 2009
Family Reunion, St. Helena

Thank you for inviting me to join you today for this special occasion. It's great to be here and take part in your reunion and – for some of you – your homecoming to St. Helena Island.

St. Helena is one of the most beautiful and special places under Heaven. Every day when I walk out my front door and see the giant Live Oaks – the wide expanses of marshland, small farms, family compounds and forests -- I am filled with peace and gratitude. I thank God for the blessing of being a resident of St. Helena Island. There is no other like it on Earth.

But, all is not perfect here. We have economic troubles like other places and we have some accessibility problems. We worry about jobs and education. But, we are making progress while, at the same time, preserving what we love most. We are improving our roads, but keeping our rural character. We are allowing new businesses that provide jobs and convenient shopping... but not so many that the character of our community is threatened.

It has been my privilege to serve the people of St. Helena Island as a council representative for nearly thirty years. I have been asked to talk to you today about the accomplishments of Beaufort County Council during the past five years and I am very pleased to share with you some information regarding one major victory that occurred recently.

It was a struggle, but I am proud to say a new County Library on St. Helena Island at Penn Center will open its doors sometime in the summer of 2011. Securing funds was a challenge. Money was appropriated then removed due to concerns about staffing. Following some restructuring of funds and a good fight - the money was restored.

The project will cost between 5 and 7 million dollars with Penn donating the 10 acre site. County Council has committed \$5 million to the project and the group Friends of the Library is conducting a capital campaign to raise money for technology and program enhancements to serve the needs of the St. Helena community.

An additional 5 to 10 thousand square feet is planned to house a Sea-Islander Research Center. This will be constructed at a future date sometime within the next few years.

The library building will be a green building – using renewable and passive solar energy, water recycling, local and natural materials. In time, the green building procedures and materials will pay off in utility savings.

The design process for the new library involved a good deal of public input and conversation with the community. Architectural students from Clemson University visited Penn Center and spent several days there getting to know the campus and identifying the right site. We held a charrette – a detailed and interactive public session -- to let citizens look over the proposed designs, ask questions and offer comments and recommendations. The final plan is for a beautiful 25,000 square foot facility worthy of our community.

A new library is much more than a just a place to read. It provides access to opportunity. It will offer academic help for students and a safe place for children and teenagers to go after school and on weekends. They will be able to use internet PCs, educational video games and other fun technology that will enhance skills and learning. The new library will offer enrichment opportunities for children, senior citizens, families and individuals of all ages as well as free use of computers and free computer classes.

This new facility for our citizens did not come without a fight. The County removed the original funds that had been approved for the project. At every opportunity – I brought up the subject and scolded those who failed in their commitment and responsibility regarding this library. Finally, they got tired of listening to me and re-allocated the money. The main sticking point was not so much the funding needed for the building, but for the recurring cost of operations. County officials were then tasked with reviewing budgets and procedures and finding a way to pay for this. As a result, new automated processes were identified and when implemented -- eliminated the need for additional staff. Problem solved.

I am very proud of this project. If I die tomorrow – I hope the people of St. Helena will remember me as one who fought hard to bring them the new, state-of-the-art library they expected and deserved.

As Chairman of County Council's Community Services Committee it has been rewarding to hold a leadership position in the development of County purchasing policies that will benefit our local and minority small businesses. We have developed an ordinance that requires prime contractors on county projects to solicit and consider local and minority sub contractors and to document this effort. It also gives preference to local and minority primes. If they come within 5% of the lowest bid – they are allowed to match that low bid. This is a new committee proposal and is expected to be implemented within the next few months.

We are working closely on this project with the with Black Chamber of Commerce and with Atlanta consultant Rodney Baker. It is also our plan to certify more local and minority subs. Government procurement policies are highly regulated and our practices are subject to heavy legal scrutiny. We have used our outside counsel many times for interpretation and direction. Certification and bonding will greatly improve the eligibility of local businesses to obtain government contracts. I am pleased to say that during the past year this effort has taken off very well and we have seen progress in the area of minority certification and bonding through educational workshops and new policies. This is especially important as federal stimulus funds become available for shovel ready projects within Beaufort County. We have shared this information with the school district which has been amenable to following our new procedures as well.

If we can keep stimulus dollars in Beaufort County by hiring local companies to do the work on local facilities – it goes without saying that our local economy will benefit. It is my expectation that in the next year or two these new and better incentives will result in a greater number of bonded and certified small businesses.

Safety improvements were completed last year to a 3.3-mile stretch of U.S. 21 from the Chowan Creek Bridge to Tom Fripp Road. This was technically a state project but the County worked closely with DOT and the contractor. We met at least once each week to discuss various hurdles such as the need for sidewalks and safe curb cuts.

We insisted that DOT save as many of our live Oaks as humanly possible. The pathway of the road was actually altered to accommodate the trees. Some oaks were relocated instead of cut down. Those we were forced to cut were sent up north to a maritime construction company that uses them on renovating historic ships. In fact, local oak trees were used for the restoration of the slave ship Amistad, which represents a significant moment in African American history. You may know that in 1839, the slaves on board rebelled when the Amistad sailed past Cuba. The Supreme Court freed the Amistad rebels two years later and the incident aroused greater public debate of the slave trade.

New traffic signals in the Corners area were activated in May of 2008. That marked the completion of the \$13 million project which includes a center turning lane and wider single travel lanes in each direction as well as 2 miles of sidewalk and new shoulders. The sidewalk helps protect our school children who walk to St. Helena Elementary.

I am certain the widened roadway has reduced the number of accidents along US 21 on St. Helena. It has also provided easier access for ambulances, fire trucks and other emergency vehicles and in the event of a hurricane evacuation – it will prove extremely valuable. The state has begun another phase of the widening and repaving which will eventually end at Harbor Island.

We have a new dollar store coming to the Corners Community. This will provide jobs and reduce the need for residents to travel into town for one or two necessities if they get in a pinch. There was some controversy regarding the rezoning of the site to accommodate the store, but I am confident county council made the correct decision in approving it.

New densities in rural areas will allow homeowners here on St. Helena more flexibility. Three by-right subdivisions will be allowed before the one dwelling per 3-acre density kicks in for the remainder of the property. This will allow existing property owners to divide their land if they chose and benefit from the sale of a small number of lots. It will also protect the rural character of St. Helena Island as it will not encourage big developers and real estate speculators. We are also protected from municipal annexation and zone shopping by developers because of the growth boundaries set up in the comprehensive plan. These boundaries were agreed upon by the Town of Port Royal and City of Beaufort and will keep the island in the unincorporated portion of the county – also keeping our taxes down.

Another positive way to preserve the rural character of St. Helena is through land preservation. The County's successful Rur4al and Critical Land Preservation Program protects the environment, wildlife habitat, and the health of our waterways. By eliminating future development on preserved sites... we remove the possibility for new residential and commercial projects. This prevents many additional cars on our roads, the need for new schools, ambulances, fire trucks and expensive services. It saves money and protects the natural outdoor beauty of our island.

We have saved more than 500 acres of vulnerable properties on St. Helena alone. This includes the Penn Center Tree Farm and Fort Fremont... an historic Spanish American War era fort that includes a beautiful white-sand beach. The site will be turned into a public park. We have also purchased development rights and easements on two local farms allowing the property owners to remain on the land and continue a tradition of family agricultural production.

Another project involves an on-going partnership between County Council and the County School District to allow public use of the St. Helena Elementary School gym for PALS basketball. There are plans to invest county money to improve the gym – even though it's a school facility. This will benefit the students and the public. The County has provided basketball there for the past 20 plus years and the gym needs some renovations.

A joint School District/County Council task force is reviewing the improvements and is also looking at other facilities throughout the county with joint usage in mind. By working together in this way we can save tax payer money and provide greater benefits to citizens.

I am also pleased with the transparency in government we have today. About two years ago, County Council began broadcasting its Council meetings and committee meetings on our new government television channel – The County Channel. We also produce documentaries and other programs about County services and issues. The broadcasts are simultaneously streamed on the internet at the County website. This way, citizens have greater access to the government process from the very beginning.

It may not always be the most exciting television programming available – but it's certainly valuable to the taxpayer. You cannot always rely strictly on the local newspapers to give you the correct facts and analysis. Citizens can now judge for themselves and make up their own minds regarding the decisions made by government officials. You can see these meetings at home on cable TV or online at the home page of the County website... www.bcgov.net.

In addition, we have digitized all our agendas, reports, codes and ordinances going back to 2006 and we are making progress in the attempt to go back even further. You can find all our documents at the Beaufort County website. Again, that's www.bcgov.net. We hope this will provide citizens with more confidence that the work of the people is done in the open. Newspaper interpretation is often inaccurate, incomplete and unbalanced. Television pundits can be misleading. Now, you can see government in action and make up your own mind.

Regardless, my constituents know they can call me any time and ask me about the issues that affect St. Helena. I'm in the phone book and I'm easy to reach.

In closing I would like to say that the kinship we have here on St. Helena Island is found in few other communities. The love we have for our land - for this community – for our shared history and culture -- gives us a “sense of place” that strengthens the soul. This, I believe, is what drives us to try and protect what we have here. I know most of you understand exactly what I mean.

Thank you.