

Wm. Weston J. Newton, Chairman
January 2005
Rural and Critical Lands Program

The Beaufort County Rural and Critical Lands program has been highly successful this past year and is a source of pride for Beaufort County Council. Thousands of valuable acres have been acquired for conservation and enhancement as economic and environmental resources. This has prevented the development of countless new homes and commercial buildings. It not only helps protect our land and water quality, but prevents thousands of vehicles from making additional trips along our limited highway infrastructure.

Beaufort County has acquired 24 properties to date. Our most recent purchase was for two parcels on Lady's Island for use as an educational and passive recreational park. The park will include the 6.1 acre freshwater lake, Crystal Lake, and an additional 10-acres of high ground. The park will not only provide leisure and outdoor classroom opportunities, but will protect the lake and surrounding wetlands and offer a scenic vista from Highway 802.

Crystal Lake and 1.9 acres of high ground were donated to the county by Beaufort County Councilman Dick Stewart's family foundation. Adjacent acreage was purchased under the rural and critical lands program.

In May, county council approved the \$3.1 million dollar purchase of a 100 acre site in Bluffton that was the once a Yemassee Native American village known as Altamaha. The Altamaha purchase represents the preservation of one of our state's most significant historic places and includes 1700 linear feet along the marshes of the pristine Okatie River. The property will remain a historic site with a portion being developed as a passive park with water access.

Also in May, council approved the \$3.25 million dollar purchase of 37 acres at the corner of U.S. 278 and Pinckney Colony Road in greater Bluffton. Preservation of this parcel prevents the possibility of hundreds of square feet of commercial development and eliminates an estimated 5,000 additional cars per day on 278.

Council also approved the \$4,950,000 dollar purchase of a portion of the Buckwalter tract off highway 278 in late 2003. Known as Okatie West, this parcel includes 82.34 acres on the headwaters of the Okatie River contiguous to the 30-acre Barrell Landing tract, purchased by the county for \$2,900,000. Okatie West includes 485 feet of frontage along 278 which will be protected from commercial development. The purchase also saves the clean headwaters of the Okatie River from the effects of dense residential or commercial development and eliminates as many as 7,000 vehicle trips on 278 per day.

In December, another 35-acre tract known as Okatie South was acquired along with an owner-donated conservation easement along the eastern shoreline of the Okatie headwaters. These acquisitions will enable the county to develop a regional park preserve with trails and facilities for camping and passive recreation. Collectively, the land purchases along 278 have eliminated as many as 18,000 vehicle trips per day.

The \$5,400,000 purchase of the historic Spanish American War fort, Fort Fremont, was yet another exciting acquisition of 2004. The fort is located on St. Helena Island and includes a beautiful beachfront on Port Royal sound. The 14.2 acre parcel will be preserved as a park, with trails, beach access and parking. These four sites, The Okatie parcels, Altamaha, Fort Fremont and the Pinckney Colony Road property, will be preserved as passive parks for the citizens of our county.

In 2004 Beaufort County became the first local government entity in the United States to partner with the Department of the Navy for the purchase of property to prevent encroachment of a Marine Corps facility. This was accomplished through a rural and critical lands purchase for 69-acres bordering MCAS. The \$311,250 cost for purchase of development rights was split 50/50 with the federal government. The property owner will continue to live on the land, which includes 8 acres of freshwater, some wetlands and several acres of forest. The parcel will remain rural. Not only does this purchase protect military operations from encroaching development. It protects wildlife habitat, land and water and makes a clear statement to Washington regarding the value Beaufort County places on its local military facilities. Through the Rural and Critical lands program, the county has been able to demonstrate its high regard for our bases and, hopefully, the Base Realignment and Closure Commission will notice our supportive efforts.

The county recently purchased 1.7 acres on deep water on St. Helena Island adjacent to the existing county boat landing. This will be an ideal spot for public recreation, especially boating and fishing. The cost was \$375,000. Purchase of development rights and a conservation easement for \$850,000 made possible the protection of 143 acres at Calhoun Plantation in Bluffton. This parcel includes a point of access to Isaac Creek. The land will remain agricultural in perpetuity. Another new purchase, a 3.5 acre parcel on the north end of Hilton Head Island, is a choice fishing area and scenic vista. It has frontage on the marshes of Jarvis Creek and includes a maritime forest.

These valuable lands – and others in years past -- were paid for from the \$40 million dollar bond referendum approved in November of 2000. Approximately \$11 million remains to be allocated to acquisitions which should occur by mid year.

With the help of the Trust for Public Land, a national non-profit “land bank” organization, Beaufort County greatly accelerated its land preservation efforts in 2004. TPL also worked with the county to create a “green print” or map, depicting desirable tracts of land for preservation. This “green print” helps us focus on citizen-identified priority parcels in a pro-active way. It also offers landowners an opportunity to preserve their acreage for the public good. To date \$30-million dollars has been used to pay for the preservation of 9,345 acres in Beaufort County. Six-million of that was leveraged from private contributions of land and cash to assist in the cost of preservation and the planning and design of parks. The program is especially valuable in this time of rapid growth and development in our region.

The help of TPL has been invaluable in these acquisitions and will mean we can continue to preserve some extraordinary tracts of land for future generations. There are some “green print” maps of Beaufort County at your table -- I invite you to take one home with you. It will show you how far we have come with this valuable program. We have a limited number of dollars remaining in the program and the number of projects under review exceeds that amount. We will continue to work with Representative Herbkersman and lobby the legislature to authorize a county-wide real estate transfer fee. We are also in the preliminary stages of discussing a second land-preservation bond referendum to preserve additional lands and our quality of life.