

Wm. Weston J. Newton, Chairman
2003
State of the County

Good morning, I have been asked to comment on the state of our county. This is a wonderful place to live and work, and we are truly blessed to live here. Your County Council believes that local Government should be run like a business and treat its citizens as customers. We continue to work with staff in this regard. It is my pleasure and privilege to speak with you today, and report on the activities of your County Council. The state of our county is good, but we are challenged to maintain, enhance and improve conditions in Beaufort County. I would like to be able to share with you many of the current activities of your County Government, but time only permits me to address a handful of specific issues that I believe are of interest to you.

Our search for a new County Administrator is moving forward. We received approximately 140 applications from more than 30 different states. We established a Citizens Advisory Committee and through a series of work sessions and corporate “profile” testing, we have focused our interest on several candidates, who were presented to the full County Council on Monday night. In the coming weeks, we will receive complete background checks on these individuals and begin the formal interview process. Another vital process the County Council is spearheading involves improvements to our Rural and Critical Lands Program.

The County’s Rural and Critical Lands program is viable and successful, but is about to get better. The handouts at each table highlight the County’s acquisitions to date. Roughly 8,640 acres have been preserved since 1997, at an approximate cost of \$14 million dollars. Recent purchases include the Bluffton Oyster Company site, and a joint purchase with the Town of Hilton Head Island for the parcel known as the Ford Shell Rings. I invite you to review the material on the tables for more details regarding purchases. But let me explain why I think the program is about to get better. The Rural and Critical Lands Board is the citizens group that advises County Council on land acquisitions. Until Monday night, the composition of the Board was primarily restricted to categories like “active farmers” and rural land owners. The Board had no representation from Hilton Head. My comments are not intended to diminish the efforts of the previous Boards. We appreciate their hard work and commend their efforts. But your County Council came to realize that it was unfair for the residents of Hilton Head, who pay more than 50 percent of the taxes used to acquire these properties, to be without any representation of the Rural and Critical Lands Board. As a result of action Monday night, the Board will mirror County Council Districts and Hilton Head residents will now have 3 seats at the table. We believe the new Board will help us to get consensus as to future acquisitions. Additionally, we have been in negotiations with the Trust for Public Lands, a nationwide nonprofit, about developing a “greenprint” of the County, and assisting the County in its land acquisitions. Along with its expertise in conservation efforts, we will look to this group to leverage the local tax dollars for far greater land purchases. The Rural and Critical Lands Program is an effort to maintain the quality of life here in Beaufort County, and key to maintaining that quality of life is sound planning.

I am pleased to announce that the Planning Staffs of Hilton Head, Bluffton and the County have this week agreed on the process to develop a Southern Beaufort County Regional Plan. The 5-year Review of the County's Comprehensive Plan conducted in April of this year included a recommendation for a Regional Plan South of the Broad River. This Plan will be regional in scope, and comprehensive in character. It will be a blueprint of what is, and what's going to be, based on approved developments, and what build-out is going to look like. It will show us where the Comp Plan says we will be in 2026. The Comp Plan review showed that growth is going to occur no matter what. The estimates I have been shown suggest that the Comp Plan could accommodate another 177,000 people in Beaufort County by the year of 2026, in addition to our current population of more than 120,000. This is based on land absorption by developments previously approved, and the capacity of properly zoned vacant land to handle new growth. The growth in Southern Beaufort County has far out-paced the rest of the County. From 1990 to 2000, Southern Beaufort County grew by 164 percent, compared to 40 percent countywide. It is not expected to continue at that level, but growth at anywhere near that level will exceed the public sector's ability to keep up with the demands for roads, recreation, open space and community facilities. It is for this very reason, that regional planning is necessary now. The success of this effort is dependent on input from the public and business community during the process. A Request for Proposals, for a neutral facilitator to assist the Municipal and County Planning Staffs in the organization of this Regional Plan, is being crafted now by the County Purchasing department and the process should begin in the earnest in the next few months.

Of course, I could not miss the opportunity to discuss the lifeline to Southern Beaufort County – U.S. 278. The South Carolina Department of Transportation has been revising the design for widening 278 to 6 lanes between the bridges to Hilton Head and Simmonsville Road in Bluffton. The redesign is scheduled for completion in early October. S.C. DOT plans to seek one bid for this project, and has indicated a contract award may be possible by the end of the year. Previously, this project was broken into two, separate phases. S.C. DOT believes it can achieve greater cost efficiency by awarding one contract. The budget for this project is \$12 million dollars, which Beaufort County has assembled over the past two years from federal, state and local resources. At the most recent events in Charleston, South Carolina, the S.C. DOT highlighted 278 as one of the three critical projects in the state. S.C DOT officials underscored the number of traffic accidents on 278 over the past five years, which include 18 fatalities, 576 injuries and 2,120 collisions. We are hopeful that federal dollars will be appropriated in the 2004 budget, and that significant dollars will be appropriated at the reauthorization of the Comprehensive Transportation Legislation known as T-21. As part of the ongoing efforts to improve the situation on U.S. 278, earlier this year Beaufort County approved a \$1.4 million dollar Intelligent Traffic System to be installed. This traffic system includes: 17 cameras along 278 between the bridges to Hilton Head and the entrance to the new USCB campus; 2 dedicated Sheriff's Office traffic patrols; a Highway Advisory Radio system; and an S.C. DOT highway assistance vehicle. The traffic patrols are in place, the cameras are being installed and should be operational in the near future. And the assistance truck should be deployed shortly.

I also want to take this opportunity today to update you on another important issue being addressed by your County Council. Earlier this year, County Council voted to delay the implementation of the County-wide property value reassessment for one year, in order to preserve its ability to debate implementation of a 15 percent cap on property assessment increases. The current 15 percent cap legislation is the only vehicle available to local government to provide citizens property tax relief. Beaufort County is studying the potential effects of the 15

percent cap, and is waiting for the results of a study from the Strom Thurmond Institute of Government at Clemson University. Additionally, the County Council is awaiting the results of a State Supreme Court ruling on a portion of the cap legislation. A previous cap adopted by Charleston County was struck down by our State Supreme Court as unconstitutional. However, that cap was based on significantly different legislation than is currently being explored by Beaufort County Council and should not be confused with the new legislation. Once the Supreme Court issues its ruling on the new law and the Strom Thurmond Institute of Government studies are complete, County Council will have a full and open debate on the 15 percent cap.

In closing today, let me mention that the long-awaited Broad Creek Boat Landing finally appears to be on track. The County will be advertising for bids September 5, with a bid opening scheduled for October 2, 2003. It is hoped that work will begin by the end of the year, and construction will be completed within 6 months.

I am honored to have the opportunity to serve as your County Council Chairman. And I thank you again for the opportunity to be with you today.