

Wm. Weston J. Newton, Chairman
2005
Greater Island Committee

Good Afternoon. I am pleased to be here today to discuss infrastructure deficiencies and finding a way to pay for badly needed road improvements without leaning any harder on property owners. This problem is not unique to Beaufort County. As the State of South Carolina continues to wrestle with budget shortfalls and is unable to pay for local highway needs -- many county governments across the state are seeking new ways to fund their roadway improvements. So far, the citizens in the counties of Aiken, Dillon, Chester, Jasper, Newberry, Orangeburg, McCormick and York have enacted a one-cent Capital Projects Sales Tax. Beaufort and several other counties in the state are proceeding with a ballot measure this November. If the referendum passes it would mean much needed improvements on our local roads and highways. Lives would be saved; productivity would increase as congestion decreased. In simple terms, quality of life would be preserved and protected through this penny tax -- the majority of which -- would be paid for by visitors. The unfortunately high accident rate in Beaufort County would drop. How many tourists want to drive back to our region after maneuvering our local highways? They will continue to come, but will they return? And how many of us -- and our loved ones -- would be safer on our roads?

After the referendum question was rejected by voters in 2002, Beaufort County -- following consultation with all the municipalities -- elected to proceed with a different method of proposing this type of infrastructure funding. The county elected to establish a capital project sales tax commission -- a dynamic 6-member commission appointed by both the county and the municipalities to identify and prioritize road projects and develop the referendum question. We were very pleased to have the leadership of Paula Harper Bethea, Colden Batty, Dot Gnann, Bruce Fairchild, Roberts Vaux and Alice Wright, who studied the matter and -- after many public hearings and meetings over many months -- made the valuable recommendations which will appear on the ballot in November. Unlike 2002, all local governments in Beaufort County have endorsed and support this initiative. Among the projects identified for funding were the widening to 4 lanes of Lady's Island Drive, construction of another two lane bridge parallel to the existing McTeer Bridge and the paving of a large number of dirt roads on Lady's Island and, additionally, it provides funding for improvements to Waterfront Park.

These are just some of the important improvements proposed. There are many other critical projects. A list of them is included in the sales tax informational brochures left for you at the front. Please take one home and review it along with a list of some frequently asked questions, or you can visit the county website at www.bcgov.net.

County Council cannot express its gratitude and appreciation to the six citizens on this commission for their invaluable service. Although we continue to lobby both state and U.S. officials -- no other funding source is available to address many of the identified infrastructure deficiencies. I personally support this Penny Sales Tax referendum and encourage all of you to review the project list and FAQ's in the brochure and make an informed decision on November 2nd.