

Wm. Weston J. Newton, Chairman
September 1, 2005
Greater Island Committee

Good Morning. I'm very happy to be here among my friends and neighbors on Hilton Head Island today. Thank you for attending and for your interest and participation in the issues that challenge us all.

Today, I will talk about the greatest challenge facing the people of southern Beaufort County. We face it every day as we leave our homes and head out into the world. If we are fortunate enough to remain here on the island, we may not realize the magnitude of the problem. But those of us, who join the work force each day, know full well the enormity of this challenge. We call it the transportation infrastructure of Beaufort County, specifically, our lifeline through Greater Bluffton, US Highway 278.

At our annual strategic planning retreat last spring, Beaufort County Council identified county needs and established goals. We chose to make an effective transportation and road system a major goal. This is not a new issue, but council wanted to newly emphasize the critical importance of the effort. Some primary objectives in support of this major goal include, obviously, safe roads, better designed roads, fewer accidents, increased federal and state funding, increased use of local and regional alternatives to cars, improved traffic flow on major highways and roads, well maintained roads, fewer dirt roads, and improved relationships with SCDOT and other governments.

Council realizes this major goal and all of its accompanying objectives will not be fully realized in one year, but we are off to a good start. The key to successful accomplishment of this goal is, of course, funding. With the narrow defeat of the penny sales tax in Nov. of last year, we have been exploring every possible alternative.

We have initiated an admissions fee, a new hospitality fee, and additional impact fees on new development in northern Beaufort County. We have written letters pleading with state and federal lawmakers for highway funding. We have taken our message to Washington – twice in 6 months – attempting to convince decision makers of the terrible need for transportation improvements in Beaufort County.

Last March, the county administrator, Mark Generales, Starletta Hairston and I met with Senators Graham and DeMint and Congressmen Wilson and Clyburn. We told them about our southern Beaufort County lifeline to the world and its terrible inadequacy and unsafe condition. We told them about the need to improve the Buckwalter Parkway and the need for completion of the Bluffton Parkway from the Hilton Head bridges to 1-95. We told them about the uncertainties of hurricane evacuations on overcrowded, outdated roadways.

Then, in May, we returned to Washington with the same urgent message. We met with US Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta as well as our federal delegation. Once more we explained how the 18 and ½ miles of highway from the Hilton Head bridges to I-95 is

overcapacity by 10,000 vehicles each day. And that the road has experienced 11 % growth per year during the last 5 years and how by the year 2020 – 82,000 vehicles are projected to use that road each day. That is twice the capacity for which 278 was intended. We told them hurricane evacuations cannot be conducted in a timely fashion. We told them again -- fix our highways -- people are dying and being injured. Our workforce is hampered, our emergency responders frustrated, our tourists discouraged and our economy at risk.

Upon our return, I directed county staff to send daily accident reports via fax to state and federal leaders. It came as no surprise to learn that US 278 averages 2.9 vehicular accidents per day. Some days there are as many as six accidents in one day on US 278. Rarely do we have a day when there are no collisions to report.

Eventually, our persistence paid off. Early last month we received the good news about Surface Transportation Reauthorization Bill HR 3, which allocates \$26,600,000 in federal aid to Beaufort County for widening and improvements to US 278 and \$10 million for widening and improvements to US 17. We are working now with SCDOT to put this money to use as quickly as possible. The faster we implement the necessary improvements, the more lives will be saved. There will be less loss of property and valuable worker productivity.

The 18 and 1/2 miles of US 278 through Greater Bluffton is being completed in three phases. Phase 1 covers a 4.5 mile section from the bridges to Simmonsville Rd. It is under way now at a cost of more than \$16 million in local, state and federal funding. Phase II takes improvements another six miles toward highway 170 at a cost of approximately \$35 million plus. Phase III is expected to cost \$75 million. It will complete the final 8-mile-link to I-95 in Hardeeville, where rapid growth is anticipated.

Seventy-five thousand new homes have been permitted in that area along with 4,000 commercial acres. Most of the funding for Phase II will come from the issuance of bonds based on the newly earmarked federal funds. Impact fees paid on development in Hardeeville will pay for a majority of the Phase III widening.

The Bluffton Parkway will provide enormous relief for US 278 and, as alternative routes, should be eligible for federal and state funding. We are working with SC DOT to designate Bluffton Parkway as a federal route.

Bluffton Parkway Phases I and II from Burnt Church Road to Simmonsville Road total approximately two miles in length. It is a four-lane divided highway, consisting of curb and gutter, raised median, eight-foot wide multi-use pathways, a 45-mph speed limit, and a construction cost estimate of \$9.6 million.

Bluffton Parkway Phase III from Simmonsville Road to Buckwalter Parkway is 2.15 miles in length. Again, it is a four-lane divided highway, consisting of curb and gutter, raised median, eight-foot-wide multi-use pathways, a 45-mph speed limit, and a construction cost estimate of \$9.5 million. The design is now complete. The wetlands permit has been acquired and the county is contracting with an attorney specializing in right-of-way acquisition to assist us.

Bluffton Parkway Phase III is from Simmonsville Road to Buckwalter Parkway. The design was recently completed. The wetlands permit has been acquired and right-of-way acquisition (Phase III-B) involves 12 parcels totaling 23.927 acres for right-of-way purchase and 10 parcels totaling 4.195 acres for construction easements. The County has contracted with attorney Chris Murphy of Charleston to assist in right-of-way acquisitions.

Bidding will open on September 21, 2005. It should complete the committee and council approval process by the end of October. A Notice to Proceed will be issued on November 1, 2005. We anticipate completion of Phase III toward the end of January, 2007.

The Bluffton Parkway Phase III-C, which is widening of the Buckwalter Parkway overlap from Hampton Hall to the Townes at Buckwalter, is 1.2 miles in length. It is a four-lane divided highway, consisting of a planted median, eight-foot-wide, multi-use pathways and a posted 45-mph speed limit. The cost estimate for construction is \$3.2 million. The design has been completed and bids open on September 21. Construction should be completed January 30, 2007.

Bluffton Parkway Phase IV represents the Buckwalter Parkway to SC 170. The project is 2.5 miles in length. It conforms to the other projects I layout and will cost an estimated is \$9.9 million. The construction period is from November 2 to January 30, 2007.

If there is sufficient available funding remaining, traffic cameras will be located at 7 locations of the Bluffton Parkway between Burnt Church Rd. and 170. They will be linked to Bluffton, Hilton Head Island and the county to allow monitoring of alternate routing to US Highway 278 and monitoring of alternate evacuation routes. The cost estimate for the equipment and installation is approximately \$350,000.

Improvements and widening of the ¼ mile north section of the Buckwalter Parkway at Townes to US 278 will cost about \$2.35 million. The 1.4 mile southern section from Hampton Hall to May River Road will cost \$2.85 million. Engineering work has not begun.

The Bluffton Parkway Phase V is from Burnt Church Road to US 278 near Buckingham Landing. This project is in the engineering feasibility and design stage. There are 3 miles of new alignment from Burnt Church Road to US 278 and 2 miles of realignment from Buck Island Road to Buckwalter Parkway. This will be a four-lane divided highway. The 2005 cost estimate totals \$50 million. Qualification Packages for the Feasibility Study were received on July 21. A selection committee is responsible for reviewing the packages and selecting and selecting an engineering team to recommend to council's public services committee in October.

The widening and improvement project for SC 46 at Bluffton Village to US 278 is approximately 1 mile in length. This project includes intersection improvements at Bluffton Parkway and will be a four-lane divided highway with five-foot-wide sidewalks and bicycle provisions for a total estimated cost of \$5,750,000.

These important projects and other priority road projects identified in southern Beaufort County will be funded by a combination of sources, including new county admissions fees and hospitality fees, road impact fees from private developers, congressional earmark funds, the Towns of Hilton Head and Bluffton, and other state and federal dollars.

Other priorities in southern Beaufort County include:

- The paving of the Foreman Hill Road connection from US 278 to Ulmer road for \$250,000.
- A frontage road from Buckingham Plantation to the Gatherings for \$300,000.
- Intersection improvements at Malphrus Road and 278 for \$500,000
- Intersection improvements at Squire Pope Road on 278 for \$1,100,000 of Hilton Head CIP funds.
- A frontage road near Tanger Outlet 1 from Burnt Church Rd. to Malphrus Road for \$1,886,00

You would think this would be enough for one county to pursue, but there's more. US highway 17, as we all know, is another big problem. In the past 3 years there have been 112 accidents on 17 in Beaufort and Colleton counties and far too many fatalities. A six-mile stretch through Beaufort County from Gardens Corner to the Combahee Bridge will be widened to four lanes. The interchange at Garden's Corner will be greatly improved. As I mentioned earlier, Beaufort County will get \$10 million federal dollars for these improvements. The total cost of the project is estimated at \$150 million. There is the potential for a state infrastructure grant for \$90 million of that and county road impact fees will contribute another \$2 million. That still leaves \$48 million which might be financed through DOT, a debt service of \$4.3 million over 20 years, an annual contribution of \$3 million from DOT and annual contribution of \$1.3 million from Beaufort and Colleton Counties and L-COG. These are tentative plans, but probable.

One interesting fact about US 17 is that 12% of its traffic is truck traffic, which is a high number of trucks. We have discussed closing that route to trucks and, possibly, seeking funding from the ports authority which benefits from the truck traffic.

Based on projected traffic volumes for the year 2020 in southern Beaufort County, US 278 should be able to accommodate the anticipated growth; not only because of additional lanes, new frontage roads and interchange reconfigurations, but because of the Bluffton Parkway and other network improvements, which will relieve much of the pressure on the main artery.

Meanwhile, during the construction period, the county has established a new US 278 web site for commuters. If you check it before leaving the house in the morning – you should receive timely information about traffic delays, lane closures or other incidents that may cause you to wait before venturing off island. That address is www.highway278.org. As we progress with construction of other priority projects, the site will include helpful information about them as well. Thank you for your patience as we work to address the transportation challenges facing southern Beaufort County.