

Wm. Weston J. Newton
October 8, 2012
State of the Region

Good morning everyone. It is an honor and privilege to be here today and visit with you. I would first like to introduce and say thank you to my current and former fellow council colleagues who have worked beside me to make this a better and stronger County.

We also have one of our County Channel partners here with us today, Tony Mills, who helps us produce our award winning educational television program Coastal Kingdom.

At your table, you will find a County Channel Information package which highlights our transparency effort, and promotes the Channel's programming with an episode of Coastal Kingdom. We hope you will enjoy it.

I would like to recognize Gary Kubic our County Administrator, Bryan Hill, Deputy County Administrator, and the other staff members here today - Suzanne Gregory, Rob McFee, Morris Campbell, Ed Hughes, Daniel Morgan, Phil Foot, Scott Grooms, Suzanne Rainey, Joy Nelson, Josh Gruber, Monica Spells, Rob Lewis, Suzanne Larson, and Terri Norris.

Last, but certainly not least, allow me to welcome my bride, Rose, without whose love, support, and patience, it would not be possible for me to be in public service in any capacity. Thank you!

Ladies and Gentlemen, despite our current and near term challenges, we live in paradise and the state of our region is strong.

On the drive over here this morning it dawned on me this is the 10th time I've had the privilege of speaking at this event and all of a sudden, while looking in the rear view mirror and thinking back to my first speech in 2003 – I realized back then I was 30 pounds lighter, 4 inches taller and had a heck of a lot more hair.

Back then, Beaufort County was dealing with the effects of 40% increase in population, overcrowded and unsafe roads; protracted evacuation times; a shortage of public facilities; strained public confidence in government, and the County and the municipalities were embroiled in various disputes including multiple lawsuits. Public services were struggling to keep up.

In the midst of these circumstances, we were searching for a new County Administrator and made his first assignment to promote responsiveness in government and expand transparency to encourage the public's trust. We knew without the support, faith and involvement of our citizens... there would be no forward progress.

Beaufort County government began to redefine itself. Today, we are more responsive to the needs of our citizens. Today, all of our meetings are televised and our government documents are posted online. Our Comprehensive Annual Financial Report located online - leads all other governmental units of the State and our Finance team has won top national awards from the Government Accounting Office.

No longer is the public unaware of what their elected officials say or how they vote. Nor is the County accused of 'back room dealing'. People can view all County meetings in real time or on demand on their televisions or computers anywhere in the world. Our progress in transparency has earned national recognition.

With transparency policies in place and intergovernmental cooperation replacing parochialism and lawsuits. Road development impact fees were passed Countywide and our citizens approved a sales tax to raise \$152 million to address more than \$300 million in roadway deficiencies.

I'm happy to report the penny sales tax was terminated on Monday as early as possible - as committed. Collectively, we achieved several major goals including six-laning and improving US 278 ... resurfacing Wm. Hilton Parkway, widening 170, expanding Buckwalter and Bluffton Parkways (further relieving congestion on 278)... a new bridge over the Beaufort river and the flyover project connecting 278 and Bluffton Parkway should commence before the year's end. We now have a safer and more accessible roadway system. Our residents and visitors can evacuate quicker and safer in the threat of a hurricane - protecting our economy, our jobs and our lives.

With workforce development in mind and the need for more opportunities through higher education in our region, the County decided to partner with USCB and TCL and make the State a deal it could not turn down – give us 4-year degree granting status and we will make \$40 million dollars of post K-12 education improvements. Fortunately and wisely, they accepted and Council created a Tax Increment Finance District and built the Southern Campuses of USCB and TCL. There may be no greater asset to any community than the ability to pursue higher learning. These campuses represent not only an investment in economic development but in our children's futures. Today our young citizens can learn and develop their skills here in Beaufort County and the University's annual economic impact has increased from \$19 million to \$74 million with an additional 750 jobs.

The Beaufort County Rural and Critical Land Preservation Program is another good example of our community's recent exceptionalism. On two prior occasions, our citizens approved, with overwhelming support, the authority to raise \$90 million to buy land and development rights resulting in approximately 21,000 acres of rural and undeveloped properties being protected for future generations.

By saving these vulnerable properties from development, we not only eliminated the possibility of thousands of additional vehicles on our roadways ... and promoted economic development but also bolstered the preservation of one of our greatest assets – our natural resources and environmental balance.

We acquired properties in partnership with the Department of Defense to protect the Marine Corps Air Station from encroachment protecting local civilian and military jobs, our local economy and our national defense. Beaufort's military installations contribute \$1.2 Billion to our local economy -- on par with Hilton Head's tourism economic impact.

The Rural and Critical Land Preservation Program has also saved thousands of acres for passive parks, scenic vistas, historic and cultural sites, natural buffers and animal habitat -- protecting our waterways, our environment and our tourism and service related jobs as people want to come here and spend money with our local businesses. I encourage you to seriously consider continuing this valuable program with your approval of the \$25 million referendum on the November ballot.

Protection of waterways does not stop in Beaufort County with land preservation. Council approved environmentally sensitive storm water management practices to insure new development no longer jeopardizes our waterways and we are now working on efforts to mitigate storm water runoff in existing developments. As a result of this work, we have been widely recognized for our policies – which are stricter than the State.

Beaufort County Council took a hard look at our deficiencies in providing human services. New and improved facilities for our mentally-challenged special needs population were needed. Today we operate a new state-of-the-art facility for our Disabilities and Special Needs that opened earlier this year and new residential homes were built for our special needs adults to provide them the opportunity for a healthy and happy standard of living. The facility and new homes represent a commitment of more than \$5 Million dollars to our special needs population. We are judged by the way we care for those who are incapable of caring for themselves and Beaufort County was awarded the Golden Order of the Palmetto from the state DSN for these efforts.

Further, children on St. Helena Island soon will be reading books from the shelves of the new St. Helena Branch Library evidencing the benefits of the partnership of County Council and Penn Center who joined forces to create this educational opportunity.

Today there are many new recreational opportunities for families to enjoy. New or improved gymnasiums, ball fields, tennis courts, a skate park, Buckwalter Recreation Center and Burton Wells Regional Park. We have started the Rail to Trail project named the Spanish Moss Trail allowing families to jog and bike while enjoying our natural surroundings. This is both a quality of life and economic development initiative. Hopefully one day soon a marathon through the marsh will rival Charleston's Bridge Run.

These improvements and new amenities demonstrate why Beaufort County is a great place to live and work. Many of these things would not have been possible without the support and partnership of our municipalities and our sister counties. Through our partnerships, improved communications and transparency, we have arrived at a new level of service and a new level of efficiency. Despite serving more people, we have reduced the size of the County workforce by almost 20% and avoided raising property taxes. We have actually done more with less.

However, the challenges continue. We need our real estate and construction sectors to come back, we need to promote economic development and facilitate redevelopment, we need to reverse the decline in values, and we must not fail to protect our natural assets. Among the near term challenges is the state mandated 5-year reassessment or reappraisal program in a depressed real estate market. Values are down and current projections indicate a countywide decrease from 45 Billion to 33 Billion -- services will need to be reduced or some folks will have to pay more on lower values. Knowing this was coming, County Council began mitigation efforts in 2009 with a reduction in appropriation levels --- from

\$104 million down to \$97 million. County government was streamlined and technical improvements introduced, allowing the County to maintain service demands with a reduced staff and without tax increases. These steps have not gone unrecognized by the national bond rating agencies which affirmed our financial strength with an increased bond rating that is 2nd highest in the State - saving your tax dollars. Just last month we realized a \$4 million savings in refinancing old bonds.

Finally, the inequities of the State education funding formulas remain among our biggest challenges – hopefully we will continue to make progress on this front and one of the upsides of reassessment will likely be more state funding for our schools.

As I approach my new position in the State House, it is difficult for me to stand here for the last time as Chairman of your County Council. I will remain committed to you and to the people of the Lowcountry and know if we face the challenges together as we have for the past decade we will continue to be the best place on earth to live, to work and to play. Thank You.