

MINUTES

Green Space Advisory Committee

May 16, 2025, 10:00 AM, 2nd Floor Meeting Room, Arthur Horne Building, 104 Ribaut Road

CALL TO ORDER:

Chair McShane called the meeting to order at 10:06 AM. Chair McShane said that public notification of the meeting was published, posted, and distributed in compliance with the SC Freedom of Information Act.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Senator Tom Davis

Timothy Evans

T. Peter Kristian

Carmen Avon Manning

Larry McElynn, Vice Chair

Michael McShane, Chair

Laurel Rhoten (virtual)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS ABSENT:

None

STAFF MEMBERS PRESENT:

Chuck Atkinson, Assistant County Administrator, Development/Recreation

Brittanee Bishop, Program and Finance Manager, Beaufort County Engineering

Christina Bryant, Green Space Program Planner, Beaufort County Planning & Zoning Department

Mark Davis, Green Space Program Manager, Beaufort County Planning & Zoning Department

Rob Merchant, Director, Beaufort County Planning & Zoning Department

Graeme Philp, Attorney, Graybill, Lansche & Vinzani

GUESTS PRESENT:

Carlton Dallas, Vice Chair, Beaufort County Board of Education

Richard Geier, Chair, Beaufort County Board of Education

Freddie Lawton, Jr., Capital Programs Education Manager, Beaufort County School District

Alice Howard, Chair, Beaufort County Council

Ethan James, Applicant, Sea Island Parkway Tracts

Mary Ryan Krieger, Deputy Community Plans and Liaisons Officer, MCAS

Katy McWilliams, Director of Land Protection, The Nature Conservancy

Kate Schaefer, Director of Land Protection, Beaufort County Open Land Trust

Jessie White, South Coast Office Director, Coastal Conservation League.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA:

Chair McShane said under “Other Business,” he’d like to discuss the concept of “Accelerate Conservation South Carolina.” Senator Davis made a motion to approve the agenda. Tim Evans seconded. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES – APRIL 11, 2025:

Senator Davis made a motion to approve the minutes of the April 11 meeting. Vice Chair McElynn seconded. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

FEE SIMPLE APPLICATION: SEA ISLAND PARKWAY TRACTS, BEAUFORT:

Mark Davis said this application had been discussed by the Committee several times before and was deferred from the April meeting. Chair McShane asked the School Board for input. Colonel Geier said he had walked the property. It is a nice property and could be used for many things. There is no need for additional impervious surface or tree removal. Colonel Geier said he took the pulse of the School Board, and everyone said that it looks like a perfect match for what we have planned for that school. By law the School Board has to vote in open session on any donation over \$500. He anticipates that the vote will be unanimous.

Peter Kristian arrived at the meeting.

Chair McShane confirmed with Mark that the application is for Green Space to provide the funds to acquire the property and then transfer ownership to the School District, and that the School Board will have to take formal action to accept the donation.

Senator Davis made a motion to move the application forward to the Natural Resources Committee with a recommendation to conduct due diligence/negotiate terms. During due diligence, the School Board could take action, subject to County Council’s approval of the final vote. The motion was seconded by Peter Kristian.

In response to a question from Vice Chair McElynn, Chair McShane said the process might be completed by Labor Day.

Mark Davis said the request in the application is for \$2.25 million. Chair McShane said that Green Space can pay no more than the appraised value.

Brittanee Bishop spoke about the proposed road project. Cougar Drive is proposed to be removed and a traffic signal installed at Gay Drive and US 21. Appraisals have been ordered, and they should have them in 60 to 90 days. The 2018 Transportation Sales Tax will pay for any ROW acquisition and improvements for road projects. Chair McShane said that our appraisals should take into account the road project. Brittanee said the School Board has requested that Cougar Drive remain open as a right-in/right out access and so there will need to be additional coordination. Brittanee said we want both projects to be successful. Vice Chair, McElynn, congratulated staff on the great coordination to date.

In response to a question from Chair McShane, Ethan James, the applicant, said he has made the property owner understand that this process takes time.

Chair McShane said he'd like to see the property become an expansion of the classroom—an outdoor lab. Colonel Geier agreed. Chair McShane said that when this transaction takes place, it should be celebrated in a public forum because the entire community will benefit. Carmen Avon Manning congratulated the landowner for bringing this forward.

Colonel Geier said the School Board understands there will be restrictions on the property in the grant agreement. There was discussion on the best way for the School Board to gain ownership of the property. Graeme Philp said certainly one transaction is simpler; we can work on this.

Chair McShane said, for the record, we had an action to move forward to go to the Natural Resources Committee with the recommendation to approve due diligence on this application. We've taken that action so we're good to go. The committee agreed on the action as it moves forward.

CONSERVATION EASEMENT APPLICATION: CHELSEA TRACTS, OKATIE:

Chair McShane said in the spirit of what I offered to committee earlier, this application is an action to accelerate conservation. I think it was timely, because the Post and Courier had a leading article today about Hardeeville being the fastest growing municipality in the nation. There has been an 85% growth in population since the 2020 Census. We have all seen the acceleration in values. That is why I want to create this Accelerate Conservation South Carolina. I want to do this locally, on a regional basis, at the state level, and I want to bring the federal government into this as well.

Chelsea is a great example. We depend on a partner like The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to have confidence in what goes on. Beaufort County created confidence that they're willing to put money in another county to have TNC go out and negotiate on a \$34 million piece of property to buy it for \$32 million and borrow \$28 million. Consider the metrics of \$28 million being borrowed, some of that at market rate. That means our partner is going to have at least \$1 million in carrying costs. It's extraordinary that a private entity was willing to do that, because if the property had gone a different way, the cost to Beaufort County would have been far more than that. Had this been annexed into the Town of Ridgeland and 6,000 units developed, and therefore other large surrounding land developed as well, this would have put tremendous pressure on SC 170 and SC 462.

Senator Davis said that brings up the issue of refundable grants. I think we can play that role to minimize those carrying costs.

Katy McWilliams said with the Gregorie Neck project, we came to the Green Space Program to help support that project and we were really excited about the opportunity to work with so many great funding partners including Beaufort County and the Marine Corps REPI Program (Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program) and we were able to protect

Gregorie Neck. Then Chelsea came up and so we wanted to replicate what we were able to do with Gregorie Neck and the foundation we built with all of these great partners committed to protection in this area and the Port Royal Sound watershed. So, we took the opportunity to purchase Chelsea.

It took a lot to pull together the funding. But we wouldn't have been able to do it without the confidence that folks have in Beaufort County. The tone that you are setting as a leader in conservation is really important and setting an example for other counties as well. So, we're excited that we're going to be able to (hopefully) have this land become public. The State Forestry Commission is our partner. They would love to purchase this property and have it become a state forest. That means it would be open to the public and offer recreational opportunities. They do not have a state forest in this part of the state, so it's a tremendous opportunity for them and they're very excited about it. So, we'd love to first protect the property with the conservation easement and that is where the Open Land Trust (OLT) comes in and hopefully the REPI program. Having the easement sets the tone for conserving the property and still allows it to be owned by the State Forestry Commission and managed for recreation.

We think it will take about two years for us to do that and during that time we will have interest costs for those loans. We hope the easement will pay off some of those loans and then we're going to help support the Forestry Commission and their fundraising efforts with a Forest Legacy Grant. Forest Legacy is a federal program that provides funding for the protection of forest land nationwide and is administered through the US Forest Service. It is Inflation Reduction Act money that is specifically within the Forest Legacy Program, and they have this money that is available. State agencies can apply for this. In this case, the SC Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has put in a \$20 million application on behalf of Chelsea.

In response to a question from Senator Davis, Katy said most of our loans have a 24-month time period. We have the opportunity to extend the majority of them for another 12 months, but we would love to get out in 24 months, because the more time we spend holding Chelsea, the less time we are using those funds for other projects.

Mary Ryan Krieger said we currently have a fair amount of funding in our local escrow account that can be used on projects like this, and we plan on submitting an out-of-cycle request. Hopefully we are going to co-share an easement with the OLT. Mary Ryan confirmed that the Marine Corps program will pay up to 50% of the cost of an easement.

Chair McShane suggested the Department of Defense program (REPI) could contribute \$6 million. He said we can help find the other \$6 million. Jasper County will need to put skin in the game on this one. Green Space can put skin in this; whatever we do is going to be far less than the cost to Beaufort County if the property did get developed. The state will also play a role. Kate Schaefer said we have an application in to Green Space for \$2 million in requested easement funds that would stay in the ground on the project as Beaufort County's contribution to the forever protection of Chelsea. In addition, we have a request for \$6 million in reimbursable funds, asking that instead of you keeping \$6 million in your Green Space account,

you allow us to employ that \$6 million as soon as possible to pay down some of the carrying costs and pay back some of the loans, understanding that this money will be reimbursed to you with the funding we anticipate at the easement closing from the Department of Defense (REPI).

In response to a question from Chair McShane, Mary Ryan Krieger said she thought her program could bring \$6 million in 12 months.

Chair McShane said, we can grant this money for 12 months with low risk (because we have a great partner who's already demonstrated this to the county), so they can reduce the debt that's paying interest, knowing we're going to get that back. The cost to the County is simply a little bit of interest. This program was not created to generate and grow an endowment; it was created to deploy and to put in the dirt. Senator Davis added, and also to foster confidence in groups like TNC for their efforts.

Chair McShane said what he would like to do today to expedite conservation, is to get County Council approval to make a reimbursable grant of \$8 million to TNC to reduce their debt. In response to a question from Senator Davis, Chair McShane confirmed that \$2 million would be hard and \$6 million reimbursable. Chair McShane said, we need to allow our \$2 million to go through its normal process, but I'd like to get it to them up front and we may elect to only take \$6 million back. We'll keep it simple--whatever the Committee's pleasure is on that. This is going to require County Council to think about something that's a little bit out of the ordinary here--to put faith in that you're willing to take \$6 million of your funds and potentially wait 12 months to get it back. Yes, there's some cost; yes, there's some risk, but to me the risk is really minimal, and the cost is frankly less than what the impact would be if we didn't help them do this.

Kate Schaefer used the computer screen to show the location of the property, approximately 2,700 acres in Jasper County. There is 2.5 miles along Snake Road. It is on the county line between Beaufort and Jasper counties. It was sold in 2019 for the first time in 100 years. It woke up the region as to the need for this type of large-scale conservation investment. Many people thought it was protected and then found out it was proposed for development.

Chuck Atkinson said this project provides a defense from the explosive growth in Hardeeville--53,000 housing units and 6 million square feet of commercial.

Kate Schaefer said not only does Chelsea provide a defense to that, but it provides an incentive for the neighboring owners between Chelsea and Gregorie Neck to protect their properties too. The accelerated benefit of a reimbursable grant opportunity allows partners like TNC and OLT and others to make those land conversions to conservation instead of development happen even faster. I think what this project will stimulate is not only more conservation like Chelsea in the Broad River corridor, but even policy acceleration in Jasper County as they are standing up their conservation fund. This project anticipates a \$2 million ask from Jasper County. Their council is currently working through the ordinances for their program with an expected start date of September.

In response to a question from Vice Chair McElynn, Kate confirmed that Jasper County will be asked for a \$2 million contribution to the conservation easement, just like Beaufort County Green Space and just like the state. Kate said there is a letter of support from the Jasper County Administrator as it is required for all out-of-county applications. They also provided a letter of support for the Forest Legacy grant that TNC and DNR put forward.

Vice Chair McElynn asked about the clear-cutting that has occurred on SC 462. Kate said this is a property called Good Hope. It was confirmed this is for timber removal and not for development. Chair McShane said because of this, this gives us a chance for the Good Hope family to look at those 18,000 acres that's so close to I-95, and that they will ultimately look to do something similar with regard to conservation.

Chair McShane said what I'm offering the Committee to think about is not just the \$2 million that we normally would do, but to really demonstrate an effective new out-of-the-box thinking of making a reimbursable grant to help a partner reduce their debt load. I would suggest we recommend in total an \$8 million award with the expectation that \$6 million of it is reimbursable.

Kate said what is a really important piece regarding Chelsea is that the lower piece shares a 1.3-mile boundary with the BJWSA canal. We have an open-air earthen canal that transports all of the Military's drinking water from Purrysburg to the BJWSA Chelsea plant and the land along that canal is not yet protected. This property would be the first piece that is.

Senator Davis said in addition to all that, just reassuring partners like TNC that we've got their back and that we will facilitate, fosters additional projects to develop that confidence.

Peter Kristian said the public will ask what the direct benefit to Beaufort County residents are. Chuck Atkinson said there are many different answers that include stormwater, traffic, ecology, and water quality. Peter said it will be imperative that Jasper County have skin in the game and that it be clear that \$6 million is reimbursable.

Carmen Avon Manning said this is a great project, but I have two issues: it is out of the county and Bluffton people will say, where is our money; and second, there is an 18-mile water canal that is not protected. Good planning needs to include hospitals, schools, water, and wastewater. This has not happened here. This is a great project, but we need more projects in Bluffton. Senator Davis said the ordinance and statute underlying it specifically talks about investing in adjacent counties, so the whole purpose of this was to look at it regionally and not artificially by county lines. Carmen said I understand that, and I understand the value of protecting outside the county for Beaufort; I'm just saying from the Bluffton standpoint, the look is you're buying more property over there with Green Space than what have you bought in Bluffton. Tim Evans said we still have the Victoria Bluff application. Chair McShane said we need to have a willing landowner, and we are encouraging our partners to work with landowners. Tim Evans said you also need to have someone to take title to the property. With the Sea Island Parkway application, we had to bring the School Board to the table to take ownership.

Tim Evans said with regard to making the case for Chelsea, there will be 7.2 miles of frontage along Hazzard Creek and 30 miles of saltmarsh and jurisdictional wetland frontage preserved. That's a huge number and it's 37 miles of water frontage that doesn't have a house and herbicide runoff and yard waste and everything else coming off of it, so I really put value into how much of that water frontage is conserved.

Chair McShane said there are two actions we need to take on the Chelsea application. An action to accelerate their application to get due diligence for the \$2 million that we would put in toward the easement; and an action to make a reimbursable grant of \$6 million to cover what the Department of Defense would do through REPI.

Senator Davis made a motion to move the application forward to the Natural Resources Committee for a hard \$2 million grant, with a recommendation to conduct due diligence. The motion was seconded by Peter Kristian. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

Senator Davis made a motion to move the application forward to the Natural Resources Committee for a \$6 million reimbursable grant under the terms discussed. The motion was seconded by Tim Evans. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

Peter Kristian pointed out that whatever it is we do in terms of land use and development, we do it to ourselves. We are now in a position to try to help and undo things, so we should try to do everything possible to do that.

OTHER BUSINESS:

Mark Davis used the computer screen to show a spreadsheet providing an update for all the active projects. Mark said staff would update the spreadsheet monthly.

Kate Schaefer said Victoria Bluff is still in due diligence. The landowner had health issues and temporarily put a pause on land transactions, but now things are moving forward again.

Mark said with regard to the Buckwalter application, the Town of Bluffton got back the title work and is waiting for their updated appraisal. Senator Davis asked about the 80-foot floating easement. Senator Davis said he would like to have the appraisal done appraising the property with and without the easement. Chair McShane agreed.

The next meeting is scheduled for June 13 at 10:00 AM in the Bluffton Library.

ADJOURNMENT:

The meeting was adjourned at 11:43 AM.

Minutes compiled by Libby Anderson, Beaufort County Planning and Zoning Department