

MINUTES

Green Space Advisory Committee

March 7, 2025, 10:00 AM, Executive Conference Room, Beaufort County Administration Building

CALL TO ORDER:

Chair McShane called the meeting to order at 10:03 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
Michael McShane, Chair
Laurel Rhoten

STAFF MEMBERS PRESENT:

Chuck Atkinson, Assistant County Administrator, Development/Recreation
Brittane Bishop, Program and Finance Manager, Beaufort County Engineering Department
Christina Bryant, Green Space Planner, Beaufort County Planning and Zoning Department
Mark Davis, Green Space Program Manager, Beaufort County Planning and Zoning Department
Brian Hulbert, Deputy County Attorney
Juliana Smith, Long Range Planner, Beaufort County Planning and Zoning Department
Rob Merchant, Director, Beaufort County Planning and Zoning Department
Amanda Flake, Natural Resource Planner, Beaufort County Planning and Zoning Department
Graeme Philp, Attorney, Graybill, Lansche & Vinzani
Jeff Vinzani, Attorney, Graybill, Lansche & Vinzani

GUESTS PRESENT:

Grant McClure, Project Manager, South Coast Office, Coastal Conservation League
Ethan James, Applicant, Sea Island Parkway Tracts
Kate Schaefer, Director of Land Protection, Beaufort County Open Land Trust

APPROVAL OF AGENDA:

Peter Kristian made a motion to approve the agenda. Lauren Rhoten seconded. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES – JANUARY 30, 2025:

Tim Evans made a motion to approve the minutes of the January 30 meeting. Peter Kristian seconded. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

ELECTION OF VICE CHAIR TO REPLACE VACANT SEAT:

Chair McShane asked for a nomination to fill the vacant role of Vice Chair. Tim Evans nominated Council Member Larry McElynn to serve as Vice Chair. Senator Davis seconded. The vote to approve Council Member McElynn as Vice Chair was unanimous.

DISCUSSION OF GREEN SPACE ADVISORY COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNTY COUNCIL REGARDING PROJECT REIMBURSEMENT FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES:

Chair McShane said Council asked the Committee to take under discussion and bring them some recommendations on reimbursement funding opportunities. Many of us have been involved in opportunities that may result in additional dollars. One of the unique aspects of Green Space is how quickly we sometimes can move versus what could be some opportunities to see reimbursement. The lead time on some federal opportunities can be 18 months. Some of our applicants have more experience than others in what those opportunities may be. That underscores the premise that we want to leverage these dollars to the greatest extent we can. Sometimes we are in a position to move quickly, and it is often said that time is of the essence in real estate. It has put us in a position that we could do some things that otherwise if we had to wait, the opportunity might be gone.

Chair McShane said he did not think the Committee would have something for Council right away, but to put the issue on the table for discussion and come back with a draft recommendation to Council. Chuck Atkinson said this is staff's expectation. Chair McShane said for today, we will put this premise on the table for a conversation we will have later, then come back to Council with a full recommendation. But in the meantime, we will always maximize opportunity to look for other additional funds that may come back. Vice Chair McElynn said he looks forward to the recommendations, because there are questions about that, and he is not sure there is a clear understanding at the moment of what the process is, or what field that's available they could go to, so this would be helpful.

Chair McShane said he felt it would be beneficial to have some external members who are engaged in this, help the Committee understand these processes. It would be a mistake to assume we could come up with that process when these are the entities that are helping to secure that type of interest. Chair McShane asked Kate Schaefer to inform our DOD partner they might be asked to serve on a task force. Chair McShane said that a nonprofit may be the holder of the purchase contract while the state and federal agencies go through their process to bring their money. Green Space may finance the deal, with the idea that the money would come back to the program.

Tim Evans said we have worked that way with TNC (The Nature Conservancy) where TNC basically supplies a bridge loan until we could supply the money on the back end and then we reimburse TNC.

Vice Chair McElynn said it would be very helpful to bring all the partners into Council to make the presentation.

Chair McShane said we will target a Council meeting in the spring.

DISCUSSION OF THE FEE SIMPLE APPLICATION NORTH WIDGEON TRACTS, OKATIE:

The Committee looked at a context map of the Widgeon Point area. Chair McShane said this discussion is a result of Council's new calendar.

Kate Schaefer passed out a project cost structure. Kate said this is a considered a "bridge project" or passing of the baton from the Rural & Critical Lands Board to Green Space. This is an ideal project to symbolize that metaphor, because Widgeon Point is a passive park property purchased by Rural & Critical with funding from the state Conservation Bank in partnership with the Open Land Trust (OLT). North Widgeon has the opportunity to be very similar, with State Conservation Bank money, Rural & Critical money, OLT as the applicant, and with your approval, Green Space funds.

Kate said in September, the landowner applied to Rural & Critical. In October, due diligence was approved, and after the due diligence came back, the Rural and Critical Board recommended purchase. The \$2.2 million from Rural & Critical, shown on the project cost structure, are the remaining funds in the Rural & Critical program.

Kate said an application for \$250,000 has been submitted to the State Conservation Bank which will be reviewed by the Conservation Bank on March 19.

Kate said the Green Space Committee saw this application at the December meeting and recommended due diligence. The funding request to Green Space is the same as the State Conservation Bank, \$250,000, 9.3% of the purchase price.

Kate confirmed that this is a priority for the Beaufort County Passive Parks Department.

Kate said as contractor for the Rural & Critical program, she would like the remaining Rural & Critical funds expended by June 30, the end of the fiscal year. Kate noted that Rural & Critical projects need three readings by County Council. Working towards a June 30 end date, Kate said she would love the Committee's approval today so it would allow the project to continue for recommendation at the April Natural Resources Committee and then approvals by Council at the end of April and through May which would allow for closing before the end of the fiscal year.

Kate said you might ask, why have both Conservation Bank and Green Space funding? Kate said partnerships have been the hallmark of the Rural & Critical program for 22 years, so it would be

a wonderful way to continue that success leading into the Green Space program. Even though multiple funding sources means more paperwork, it is an important component of the partnerships involved.

Chair McShane noted the first project for the Rural and Critical Lands program was in this neighborhood. Kate said yes, it was Lemon Island, which was purchased in part with pre-referendum dollars, giving rise to the voter approval for the Rural and Critical program. Then Widgeon Point was purchased in 2006 with funds from Beaufort County, OLT, and the State Conservation Bank. So, all the partners that were there at the beginning, are here now. This property has been for sale for a long time and was previously platted for seven lots. Even developing one or two houses would disrupt the conservation investments that have been made in this corridor. As to the value of Widgeon Point Park, if you look at the eagle's nest, you look at this property.

Kate said if the Committee takes action today, the application can go to the April 7 Natural Resources Committee. Then it can go to the April 28 Council meeting. That would also be first reading for the Rural & Critical funds.

Carmen Avon Manning arrived at the meeting.

Chuck Atkinson said since this is time sensitive, you could request that it be advanced from the April 7 Natural Resources Committee to the April 14 Council meeting. Chair McShane suggested the Committee be judicious when we do that, and do we need to do that since the Rural & Critical funding is such a big component and that approval will extend into May.

Vice Chair McElynn confirmed with Kate that this property was the number one priority for the Passive Parks Department. Kate also confirmed this was currently vacant land. There are three different landowners that own all seven lots in partnership.

Jeff Vinzani, referring to the context map, asked what the strip between the subject property and Widgeon Point was and who owns it. Chair McShane said this is marsh and the state owns it unless they can show they have King's Grant. Kate said the title commitment is just for the 9.55 acres of North Widgeon and the marsh is state owned.

Chair McShane asked for a motion to move forward on the recommendation to Council. Tim Evans said any time we have a report back to the taxpayers, the idea that we put 10% in this project and can claim a \$2.7 million benefit to the County for a \$250,000 investment, we are foolish not to move ahead, so I recommend we move ahead with all speed and haste in approving this, understanding that the remaining few diligence items will be completed before closing. Senator Davis seconded. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

FEE SIMPLE APPLICATION: SEA ISLAND PARKWAY TRACTS, BEAUFORT:

Mark Davis presented the initial staff summary evaluation using the computer screen. Mark said this is a fee simple application for two parcels totaling 6 acres. Mark noted the location of Lady's

Island Middle School. Mark said there are possibilities of partners being involved in this. Road realignments will be occurring—Cougar Drive is being moved to align with the intersection of Sea Island Parkway at Gay Drive where a traffic signal will be installed. The existing (Cougar Drive) access will be removed. Stormwater easements will have to come across the subject property. Mark said the School District is aware of this application and a School District representative was planning on being here today. In response to a question from Tim Evans, Mark said the ultimate ownership of the property is to be determined.

Ethan James, the applicant, addressed the Committee. He said he is not sure what the end use or partnerships would look like; the goal is to bring it up for discussion and find the right partnerships. Ethan said it is his understanding that Lady's Island Middle School is being completely rebuilt and that there is not a lot of use for the area next to the marsh near where this property is located. We are actively trying to sell these parcels and have had inquiries about apartments and storage uses, but he thinks this use (green space) is a much better use for the community.

Laurel Rhoten asked if the applicant has spoken with representatives of Lady's Island Airport; they might have an interest in keeping this property vacant. Ethan said he had not spoken with them, but it is a great point.

In response to a question from Chair McShane, Ethan said he represents the current owners.

Peter Kristian asked if other partners would be financial partners. Ethan said possibly. He said they have had appraisals on the property, but they are older. Other properties along the corridor have sold for much more price per acre. The landowners have offered it below the current value. Mark Davis said there would be a partnership with County Engineering for the ROW. The School District has not said they would be a financial partner at this time. The conversations we have heard with the School District would be kind of a matching land donation that would then be encumbered with covenants. Peter Kristian said he is disappointed the School District is not here today.

Tim Evans said he is concerned about who the eventual owner will be. Using Green Space money to buy a piece of property for someone who is not interested in it; I need to hear who the eventual owner is going to be and that they have an interest.

Carmen Avon Manning asked if the school had any plans for fields on the subject property. Chair McShane clarified that the question is what's the school interested in. Have they indicated they are interested in that acreage?

Mark said he has had preliminary conversations with the School District, and they have indicated interest in being a partner, however, they have not provided a definitive answer at this time that they would be willing to support ownership and operation of these parcels.

Carmen Avon Manning asked if the road deal was done. Mark said County Engineering is currently working toward the process of ROW acquisition. Chair McShane clarified that the County Engineering Department wants to do this road project. Mark said yes, and they have money to do this. Chair McShane said the road project would have impacts and the property owner would be compensated for those impacts. Mark said correct, even if Green Space wasn't involved.

In response to a question from Jeff Vinzani, Ethan James said the existing road to be abandoned is all on School District property; it is the existing access to the school. Mark Davis said it is a private road that functions as a driveway.

Chair McShane said it is his sense that the Green Space Committee needs to hear from the School District that this is a priority acquisition; not necessarily that they participate, but that they would take ownership of it.

Peter Kristian made a motion to defer action on the application so that the School District can provide their perspective. Tim Evans seconded. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

Peter Kristian asked for an update on County Council's action regarding the Mitchelville property. Chuck Atkinson said the County approved funding as recommended by the Committee. Right now, we are working with the attorneys to amend the paperwork so that we can get them their money.

EXECUTIVE SESSION:

Peter Kristian made a motion to go into Executive Session pursuant to S.C. Code Section 30-4-70 (A) (2): discussion of negotiations incident to proposed contractual arrangements for the following proposed Green Space applications: Conservation Easement Application, Trotter's Loop Tracts. Senator Davis seconded. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

The Committee was in Executive Session from 10:59 AM to 11:35 AM.

MATTERS ARISING OUT OF EXECUTIVE SESSION:

Laurel Rhoten made a motion that the Green Space Advisory Committee recommend to County Council approval to fund the Trotter's Loop conservation easement application in the amount requested by the applicant. Peter Kristian seconded. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

OTHER BUSINESS:

Chair McShane said he would be coming back to the Committee with ideas about partners to serve on an ad hoc task force regarding reimbursable funding. He will work with staff on this.

Senator Davis outlined a number of state partners that could be tapped for the task force. Chair McShane said never forget the landowner portion; that is just as generous.

In response to a question from Carmen Avon Manning, Mark Davis said we received one application in the 1st quarter of 2025. Carmen said we had been having four or five applications every quarter and now we are having a lull; is there something that we need to do. Carmen said it had always been her concern that we look at these applications, not because they are first-come, first-serve, but so that we get the most bang for the buck. It is hard to do if you don't know the final numbers. Laural Rhoten said, to add onto that, is our work equitable between all the areas in the county? Chair McShane said based on what he has heard, he thought we were going to see a lot of activity this year, including out of county.

Peter Kristian asked for a report at the next meeting about how much has been expended and what may be in the immediate pipeline. Laurel Rhoten also asked for geographic information. Chair McShane asked for the update as of April 1.

Chuck confirmed that the sales tax has stopped collecting and that the money is earning interest. Chair McShane said approximately \$111 million has been collected.

Chair McShane said the landowner tax credit is currently capped at \$250/acre. It has been that way since 2002. If we could see that go to \$1,000/acre tax credit, that may be as valuable or more valuable as cash. There is an annual cap on how much of that credit you can use, but you can carry it forward. There is a market for tax credits. To me, that becomes another compensation aspect for landowners.

Vice Chair McElynn said there is more here than meets the eye. There are a lot of intricate moves. He said he doesn't think anyone appreciates the amount of work that goes into this. Vice Chair McElynn said he is happy to be here and looks forward to participating.

ADJOURNMENT:

The meeting was adjourned at 11:44 AM.

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