

MINUTES

Green Space Advisory Committee

January 16, 2026, 10:00 AM, Executive Conference Room, 100 Ribaut Road

CALL TO ORDER:

Chair McShane called the meeting to order at 10:00 AM. Chair McShane said 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 (virtual)

Larry McElynn, Vice Chair

Michael McShane, Chair

Laurel Rhoten

COMMITTEE MEMBERS ABSENT:

None

STAFF MEMBERS PRESENT:

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

Brian Hulbert, County Attorney

Rob Merchant, Director, Beaufort County Planning & Zoning Department

Graeme Philp, Attorney, Graybill, Lansche & Vinzani

Jeff Vinzani, Attorney, Graybill, Lansche & Vinzani

Juliana Zadik, Long Range Planner, Beaufort County Planning & Zoning Department

GUESTS PRESENT:

Dana Bauer, SC Sentinel Landscape Coordinator

David Bishop, The Nature Conservancy (TNC)

Ben Brown, Town of Hilton Head

Paula Brown, Council Member, District 8

Will Cook

James Douglas, SC Forestry Commission

Alice Howard, Chair, Beaufort County Council

Cheryl Mansson

Scott Phillips, State Forester

Caylor Romines, Director of Land Stewardship, Beaufort County Open Land Trust

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

Elvio Tropeano

Kristi Trumps

PUBLIC COMMENT AND INTRODUCTIONS:

Chair McShane recognized and welcomed Alice Howard, Chair of Beaufort County Council, Paula Brown, County Council Member District 8, and Scott Phillips, State Forester. Chair McShane asked if there was any public comment. Council Member Brown said she represents District 8, which is the eastern part of Bluffton. She said she thought the Green Space Program was like a pie, divided into four pieces. Bluffton has gotten nothing. We have Willow Run and the Derst property; nothing has been done. Hilton Head gets its stuff; Northern Beaufort County gets stuff. We've got nothing and I'd like to know why.

Chair McShane said we do this on a voluntary basis in terms of applicants bringing in applications. We've had several applications that have come out of that region. We tried to work with the Town of Bluffton on a large project. They elected not to accept our grant for that project (Buckwalter).

Senator Davis said there is a substantial piece of land that is still in due diligence next to Victoria Bluff, which would be extremely important for the Bluffton area. Kate Schaefer said they talked with the appraiser for Derst today. You may remember the applicant had been very ill for about a year, which is why so much time has elapsed. The project is back up and running. The appraisal should be available by the Committee's next meeting. We continue to be enthusiastic and excited about this property and believe it would make a wonderful addition to the Bluffton area Green Space holdings as a conservation easement which comes at less dollars than fee-simple ownership.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA:

Tim Evans made a motion to approve the agenda. Peter Kristian seconded. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

ADOPTION OF MINUTES – December 19, 2025:

Laurel Rhoten made a motion to adopt the minutes of the December 19, 2025 meeting. Tim Evans seconded. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

EXISTING APPLICATIONS/OLD BUSINESS:

Fee Simple Application: Palmetto Bluff – Pioneer Land & Timber Tracts:

Chair McShane asked that staff distribute Carmen Avon Manning's written comments to the Committee. Mark Davis used the computer screen to review the application. Mark said this application had come before the Committee at the December meeting and it was recommended by the Committee to move forward for due diligence and negotiations; however, there were some additional items for further discussion. We have also updated the backup material and provided the Town of Bluffton zoning determination letter regarding the properties and allowed land uses.

Carmen Avon Manning joined the meeting virtually; however, the Committee was not able to hear her.

Chair McShane said the Committee had some questions about the long-term stewardship of the property that would potentially go to the state Forestry Commission, which is why the applicant invited the State Forester and his staff to be here.

Scott Phillips said the Forestry Commission manages land across the state. We are working on another project near Beaufort County right now — Chelsea State Forest. All of our state forests are managed for multiple use—forestry, public hunting and fishing, and passive recreation. Scott mentioned that Harbison State Forest in the City of Columbia is a mecca for bikers and hikers; 100,000 people per year recreate there. No hunting is allowed. Each state forest is little different. When we develop a master plan for Chelsea and potentially Palmetto Bluff, we would engage the community to see what amenities you want on that property in the future.

Kate Schaefer said OLT is fully supportive of this application. This is 4,900 acres; it is contiguous, unfragmented property in Bluffton which is hard to find. This has always been managed separately from the Palmetto Bluff development. This amenity can be accessed without going through the gated community. There is 13 miles of frontage along the New River. By adding to the currently protected land in the area, we are able to provide conservation and public recreation near a major population center.

Scott Phillips said conservation education is part of our state forest mission as well. This piece of property, because of the development around it, will be more recreation and conservation based. One thing that is very unique about the Forestry Commission is that it manages its property 100% off receipts; there is no state or federal funding used to manage these properties. Even on this property, the Forestry Commission will need to manage some timber, and 25% of those receipts come back to the county to support the school system.

David Bishop said our role is to present an opportunity to take what has been privately owned and unavailable and make it public, so it is a little different than some projects we do such as the Chelsea project. Other funding sources could be available such as Forest Legacy. Chair McShane said the State Conservation Bank may be able to take a significant role, with the Forestry Commission taking title to the property. Chair McShane mentioned the 800 acres owned by the County. Chair McShane offered the concept of having the Forestry Commission manage the County property along with the Palmetto Bluff property which could have a much bigger impact for residents and the area.

In response to questions from Peter Kristian, Scott Phillips said the “receipts” are from timber sales, sale of forestry products like pine straw, user fees, and leases (agriculture, county parks, etc.). Most of the revenue comes from the larger forests. The management for the Palmetto Bluff tract would be for forest health; most of the revenue would be from user fees.

Senator Davis asked about the Forest Legacy program. Are those dollars still available and how are they accessed? Scott Phillips said this program is managed by the Department of Natural Resources and the Forestry Commission is a full partner. South Carolina has done extremely well over the years in accessing Forest Legacy funds. It is part of the Land and Water Conservation

Fund, so it's funded as part of a larger pie and those funds are relatively stable. Typically, Forest Legacy has a limit of \$20 million to a state, but under the Inflation Reduction Act, we were able to go up to a \$50 million grant which was the maximum they could do. The Chelsea project received \$24 million from the Forest Legacy program. Forest Legacy is a very competitive, national program and there is a pipeline of projects that are submitted to the program.

Chair McShane said we do well because we have a state conservation bank and a county participating, and the federal agencies love to see that other entities are playing a role and that scores those projects higher.

David Bishop said the landowner has committed to \$5 million in donated value. Scott Phillips said leveraging means a lot when you are putting in for federal grants.

In response to a question from Tim Evans regarding the Commission's position on having property in Beaufort County, Scott Phillips said we are very strategic in land acquisition. The Lowcountry was an area where we didn't have a state forest. There is the Niederhof Forestry Center in Ridgeland in Jasper County. We started looking at where we already have a footprint that could be expanded. We saw the Niederhof Forestry Center as a hub. There is a shop there and they have a few employees there. So, Chelsea fit well with Niederhof Forestry Center. We also have the Buckfield project going on in Yemassee, so the more acres we can add in, the more economical it is to manage. After the Chelsea and Buckfield projects, Palmetto Bluff could be a natural addition for us, even though it will not be a major timber producer. It is one of the landscapes we need to protect as an organization. It is a very special place, so it fits into the overall plan as we add properties to this hub.

Laurel Rhoten asked if the Palmetto Bluff property is being managed right now. David Bishop said yes, it is being well-managed for timber and recreation. Scott Phillips said we have spoken to the firm who manages the tract. Kate Schaefer clarified that this property is owned by a different entity than the Palmetto Bluff development. It's within the development agreement, but it is and always has been a separate entity.

Mark Davis confirmed that the Committee had already recommended due diligence for the project during their December meeting. Chair McShane said this is a project that we will continue to have discussion about until due diligence is completed; this is a big project.

Chair McShane said County Council took the unprecedented move to approve a \$6 million reimbursable grant to TNC for the Chelsea project. That saved TNC \$170,000 in interest. That is not an insignificant savings. We hope Council takes a lot of pride in that; that has been a good use of money. This underscores the success of having Green Space be in a position to possibly do that again, perhaps with the reimbursement that will come from the Department of Defense/War.

Conservation Easement Application: Simmons Tract, Hilton Head Island:

Mark Davis said this is an application from the Open Land Trust for a conservation easement. A site visit was conducted recently. The request is for 50% of the appraised easement value.

Kate Schaefer said this is a 9-acre conservation easement on Hilton Head. There is not a lot of opportunity in the Town for conservation easements, but this area is one. The property drains into Old House Creek. The other applications you have considered on Hilton Head have been fee simple and were larger dollars. OLT is asking the Town to pay 50% of the easement value—the same amount OLT is asking from Green Space. The land is currently comprised of two parcels. There would be no further subdivisions. The property has a family cemetery which would remain.

Peter Kristian asked how many units this might take off the market. Ben Brown responded approximately 50 units. Peter said he has spoken with the owner and he has received multiple offers for the property.

Tim Evans commended the request for a conservation easement rather than another fee simple purchase. A conservation easement on Hilton Head is a fantastic opportunity.

Peter Kristian made a motion to recommend funding of the application to the Natural Resources Committee. Chair McShane said the motion was seconded. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous by the Committee members present.

Vice Chair McElynn asked for clarification on the values. Chair McShane said we are committing 50% of the appraised value of the easement from Green Space and the applicant is looking for partners for the remaining percentage. Fifty percent is a little bit higher than what we have classically done, but there is not really a tax benefit for this owner as there may be for other owners. Chair McShane said he views this more as a working lands project similar to what they have at the state bank.

Kate Schaefer said OLT is not going to the state with the application; however, the Town of Hilton Head will be asked to fund the other 50%.

OTHER BUSINESS:

Discussion Regarding Amending Ordinance (Sec. 38-196) to Accelerate Project Approvals:

Chair McShane said currently, we go with the recommendation for due diligence to the Natural Resources Committee, then complete the due diligence and then go back to Natural Resources for final approval that they recommend to full council. The calendar sometimes plays a role here, because Natural Resources does not meet as frequently as County Council. So, the discussion today is to consider changing the ordinance to allow recommendations to go straight to full Council for due diligence and then back for final approval. This is not a reflection on the Natural Resources Committee; this is simply trying to make the calendar work and accelerate opportunities. Vice Chair McElynn said that calendars may cause us to miss opportunities. We may want to leave an opportunity to go to Natural Resources after due diligence but before

going to Council for final approval in the event we had an issue that might have to be discussed there.

Chair McShane said we are not looking to cut out Natural Resources; we are just trying to expedite applications. The reality is Natural Resources meets about 10 times/year; Council meets 20 or so times/year.

Senator Davis said County Council always has the authority to remand the application back to Natural Resources. Tim Evans said it's not cutting them out; it can be Natural Resources or County Council as the case may be. Laurel Rhoten said I don't think we are cutting out Natural Resources to approve due diligence. Due diligence should be approved by County Council when they are most available. Peter Kristian said we don't want to miss an opportunity because of a deadline for a sale. Chair McShane said that's the whole motivation.

Project Updates:

Chair McShane said there was a comment made recently about why these regions were not made based on county council districts. Chair McShane said this is part of the ordinance Council adopted—to create four geographic regions specifically not to adhere to council districts. It is not districts; it is regions. Mark Davis said we are also following the state statute which also speaks to the four geographic regions.

Mark Davis used the computer screen to present project status updates. Kate Schaefer reviewed the status of the three Open Land Trust Northern Region projects--Half Moon Island, the Campbell Tract, and Cotton Hope. Tim Evans mentioned a New York Times article on the Half Moon property. Mark Davis reviewed the status of projects in the Eastern Region—the Messick tract, Sea Island Parkway tract, Pine Grove, and Harper. Ben Brown reviewed the status of projects on Hilton Head in the Southern Region—William Hilton Parkway, Old Wild Horse Road, Simmons tract, and Broad Creek Marina. Chair McShane reviewed the status of projects in the Western Region—Victoria Bluff and Buckwalter Parcel 5C. Kate Schaefer said the appraisal for Victoria Bluff should be back mid-February. OLT will seek partners at the state level for Victoria Bluff.

Senator Davis said he will be meeting with the Bluffton delegation to discuss Buckwalter Parcel 5C. Chair McShane said the Green Space Committee welcomes the opportunity to continue to work with the Town of Bluffton on all three Buckwalter Parcels.

In response to a request from Vice Chair McElynn, Mark Davis used the computer screen to review the Green Space Program Funding Status as of 1.09.26. Chair McShane asked that this be shared with County Council along with the Green Space Committee meeting schedule.

ADJOURNMENT:

The meeting was adjourned at 11:12 AM.

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