

MINUTES

Green Space Advisory Committee

March 13, 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

Larry McElynn, Vice Chair

Michael McShane, Chair

Laurel Rhoten

COMMITTEE MEMBERS ABSENT:

None

STAFF MEMBERS PRESENT:

Chuck Atkinson, Assistant County Administrator, Development/Recreation

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

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

Brian Hulbert, County Attorney

Monica Main, Deputy County Attorney

Rob Merchant, Director, Beaufort County Planning & Zoning Department

Michael Moore, County Administrator, Beaufort County

Graeme Philp, Attorney, Graybill, Lansche & Vinzani

Jeff Vinzani, Attorney, Graybill, Lansche & Vinzani (virtual)

Nicole Wood, Deputy County Administrator, Beaufort County

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

GUESTS PRESENT:

David Bishop, The Nature Conservancy (TNC)

Paula Brown, Council Member, District 8

Joy Coe, Rose Hill resident

Mike Hagen, Rose Hill resident

Alice Howard, Chair, Beaufort County Council

Tony Kukulich, The Post & Courier

Richardson LaBruce, Attorney for Town of Bluffton

Tony LaMartina, Rose Hill resident

Nancy Pardo
Caylor Romines, Director of Land Stewardship, Beaufort County Open Land Trust
Felicia Roth, Director of Compliance and Contracts, Town of Bluffton
Kate Schaefer, representing Beaufort County Open Land Trust
Stephen Steese, Town Manager, Town of Bluffton
Dick Stewart
Elvio Tropeano

APPROVAL OF AGENDA:

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

REVIEW OF MINUTES – January 16, 2026:

Chair McShane said the attorneys submitted comments regarding identification of speakers. These comments/revisions will be incorporated in the minutes. Vice Chair McElynn made a motion to adopt the revised minutes of the January 16, 2026 meeting. Tim Evans seconded. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Council Member Paula Brown said at the last Green Space meeting she attended, there was a lot of talk about how much money came into Green Space from May 2023 until March 2025. Council Member Brown said she got the exact number from the state Department of Revenue--\$120,059,667.81. She also did some additional research, as she keeps hearing that Hilton Head brings in all the money. She said she has the facts: Bluffton brought in \$13.2 million and Hilton Head brought in \$6.6 million.

NEW APPLICATIONS:

Corridor Protection Application: Grangers Retreat Tracts, St. Helena Island:

Mark Davis used the computer screen to present the application. Mark said this is a Scenic Corridor application type. The landowner is proposing to sell the property directly to the County. This is a corridor application, so public access is not required, although the County could choose to provide public access. There are two pieces--one is an island that has been subdivided into 11 lots; the other is on the mainland, directly adjacent to a County-owned boat landing. The mainland parcel has a dock. If the County purchased the properties, the island lots would be combined. There are multiple property owners.

In response to a question from Tim Evans, Mark Davis said staff has talked with the Public Works Department. They have expressed interest in the mainland piece since it is adjacent to a County boat landing. Chair McShane said this might enhance public access to the water. Tim Evans said that a portion of the funding could come through Public Works rather than Green Space. Chair McShane said at this point, there does not appear to be any other funding sources aside from Green Space.

In response to a question from Peter Kristian, Mark Davis said the island lots could not be subdivided further; they are already out of zoning compliance. The only way these lots can be accessed is by water.

Chair McShane confirmed the applicants wanted 100% of the appraisal.

Laurel Rhoten said protecting the island would protect the creek around it.

Tim Evans made a motion to move the application to the Natural Resources Committee, with a recommendation to conduct due diligence. The motion was seconded by Laurel Rhoten. In response to a question from Carmen Avon Manning, Chair McShane said the money for due diligence is coming from Green Space, because the Green Space Advisory Committee (GSAC) wants the due diligence in the County's name. In response to a question from Carmen Avon Manning, Mark Davis said the summary sheets will show the grant award and any due diligence. Applicants have the right to request due diligence reimbursements if the project results in a closure. Vice Chair McElynn said he is conflicted with this application, as the island portion will likely remain as it is. Chair McShane said sometimes the due diligence may give the opportunity to answer this; having the defensible metrics is worthy of some due diligence. Vice Chair McElynn said his conflict includes who pays for the due diligence which would be a county expense.

Tim Evans said this is a viewshed corridor and it reminded him of fish camps. Does the GSAC want to see another fish camp when looking off Sea Island Parkway? Tim mentioned Kingfisher Point off of US 17 just before West Ashley. This is a little 3 ½ acre island. There are now seven homes that completely engulf an island that may not exist 30 years from now. That is now the view from US 17. The application which the GSAC is considering would keep the island from becoming the next one of those. For the right price, the Committee ought to lock this up and not see development there.

Peter Kristian mentioned the runoff that would occur if 10 homes were to be developed there.

Mark Davis said there will be two appraisals—one for the island and one for the mainland piece.

Carmen Avon Manning said the GSAC is getting to the bottom of the funds, and she hopes it is looking at projects with a very critical eye and asking if this is the best place to spend the money.

The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

EXISTING APPLICATIONS:

Conservation Easement Application: Victoria Bluff Tracts, Bluffton:

Caylor Romines, Beaufort County Open Land Trust (OLT), used the computer screen to review the application. This is a 406.5 acre property and is one of, if not the most important, tract remaining in the western region. Caylor showed some drone photos of the area. The landowner is reviewing the draft easement and is further restricting it. The owner would like it to be one

single tract and is also reducing the size of the designated building area from 5 acres to 3 acres. The appraised value of the conservation easement is \$12,450,000. Caylor said the applicant is asking for 60% of the appraised value of the conservation easement, which would be \$7,470,000. The State Conservation Bank is being asked for 10% of the value. The landowner is donating 30% of the value of the conservation easement.

Chair McShane said for disclosure, this application is also in front of the State Conservation Bank and he serves on that board.

Caylor Romines said he would like the support of the County to take to the State Conservation Bank.

Because she had visited the property and noticed some vehicles there, Carmen Avon Manning asked if a Phase 1 Environmental Site Assessment had been done on this. Chair McShane said one will have to be done if it hasn't been done already. Carmen then remarked that the appraisal report was very nice and thanked the landowner of such a significant property for coming forward and trying to use this process.

Peter Kristian asked about the development potential of the property. Mark Davis said the property is zoned Rural and the Future Land Use Plan map shows it this way. Chair McShane said it allows 1 unit/3 acres, so about 130 units could be developed under the current zoning.

In response to a question from Vice Chair McElynn, Caylor Romines said the conservation easement is valued at 65% of the appraised market value. Chair McShane said he was not shocked by this.

Tim Evans said an \$18 million valuation for the property in that location is not a bad deal; it could be a lot worse than that. Chair McShane said given the context, it is an easy number to defend.

Senator Davis made a motion to recommend funding of the application to County Council to pay 60% of the appraised value of the conservation easement. The motion was seconded by Peter Kristian. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

Chair McShane said that something historic took place here in Beaufort County this week. Clarendon Farms is located in the northern part of the County. The family donated an easement on 4,400 acres that was fully entitled. It is now the single largest donated easement in the history of our state and perhaps nationally. This is a huge public benefit.

Conservation Easement Application: Chelsea Tracts, Okatie:

Chair McShane said this is an out-of-county application. This is the tract that the County Council made a historic move to make a \$6 million reimbursable grant that saved TNC a quarter of a million dollars in interest. Chair McShane said the issue is, does the GSAC want to make a recommendation to Council to leave money in this project?

Kate Schaefer, representing OLT, the applicant, reviewed the application. OLT along with the Navy would be the easement holder. TNC is the current property owner. The property is in Jasper County and has frontage on Snake Road, SC 462, and SC 170. It would reduce congestion on those roadways and protect water quality in the Port Royal Sound. There is immense benefit to Beaufort County residents in protecting Chelsea. The easement will be across 2,672 acres. The easement value is \$11 million. The Department of Defense is being asked for \$5.5 million. The state and Jasper County is being asked to contribute. Green Space is being asked for \$2 million. Kate said the initial \$6 million reimbursable grant will be returned at easement closing. The question today is, will the Green Space Committee recommend approval for \$2 million to stay in the project?

Kate Schaefer said for only \$2 million: the Committee is protecting property with over \$34 million in fair market value; protecting road frontage along Snake Road and SC 462; and protecting 1 ½ miles of our water canal. Kate said the Forestry Commission has been awarded a Forest Legacy grant from the federal government to purchase the property, protected by the conservation easement. Their ownership of the property will allow public access.

Tim Evans said not only is there 1.5 miles of water canal, but there is 37 miles of direct water access and impact. This is a water protection project.

Senator Davis said this is an excellent example of why the Green Space law was drafted to allow out-of-county purchases. This is on the Jasper County side of the line, but the direct impacts to Beaufort County are obvious. Sometimes we get really parochial in regard to where the exact location of the land is, and we lose sight of the fact that preserving it benefits a wider geographic region. This project is a great example of why the legislation allows out-of-county purchases.

Laurel Rhoten said there is a lot of development along SC 170 north of here and so much development along Argent Boulevard and seeing this protected is extremely important in the middle of those.

Carmen Avon Manning said \$2 million is an easy decision for the amount of acreage and the location. Carmen asked about the timing of the grant and when the transaction might occur. Kate Schaefer said the State Bank will review their application on March 18, Jasper County in May, and the Department of Defense and the State Forestry Commission sometime between now and June. Closing is expected in July.

Carmen Avon Manning said this project benefits many regions in Beaufort County, not just the western region. Where it's located geographically is not the point; it's what it's serving. There is a military advantage and clearly the water canal and the traffic and all these are more than just the western region.

Peter Kristian made a motion to recommend to County Council \$2 million in funding for the out-of-county application. The motion was seconded by Vice Chair McElynn. Brian Hulbert asked if

the Committee wanted to make the grant contingent on the Department of Defense grant. Chair McShane said that can be worked out in the negotiations. He then asked for a vote on the motion. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous. Kate Schaefer said another stakeholder to see at County Council discussions is BJWSA. They are neighbors to the project and their Board of Directors has taken a vote to support this project.

Senator Davis referred to a map of the area to identify the Chelsea project, the Victoria Bluff property, the Buckwalter tracts, and the New River State Forest. Senator Davis said the GSAC is talking about putting far more than 25%, perhaps 30-35% of the \$100 million into an area where there has been some discussion as to whether it has been treated equitably. Senator Davis pointed out there are several large purchases that are going into the Bluffton area. The Committee needs to guard against being parochial and linear in thinking that a certain number of acres need to fall within artificially drawn boundaries. These boundaries were drawn as a tool for the Committee to look at equitably distributing money around the County. State legislation didn't require this; the County did this to accomplish that objective. He encouraged the GSAC to think about what is best for Beaufort and Jasper counties in terms of taking density off the books, preserving water quality, taking cars off the road, and not being so technical in looking at precisely where geographic boundaries fall because that is short-sighted. Between these projects, there are substantial and material benefits to the Bluffton area. Vice Chair McElynn said he agrees, and it will be clear during the Council discussion that the benefits of the project spread across a wide area.

Chair McShane reminded the group that the GSAC is working with a willing landowner on a voluntary basis. This shows that the system works.

Carmen Avon Manning said when the sales tax was being voted on, there was a lot of concern about out-of-county purchases. This is one of the best examples because it has so much impact on the entire county.

Chair McShane said this is a landscape approach, not just one resource—water, air, etc.

OLD BUSINESS:

Project Updates

Mark Davis used the computer screen to present the "Green Space Program Project Update March 2026."

Caylor Romines said the first draft of the appraisal for the Campbell tract is almost completed. The Cotton Hope appraisal is a little behind the Campbell tract.

Mark Davis said the Messick tract may be withdrawn. Regarding the Wild Horse project, the Town of Hilton Head may be moving in a different direction.

Chair McShane said the "Palmetto Bluff" project will now be called "New River Forest" to avoid confusion.

Senator Davis asked in order to give a sense of scale, what the other properties that Forestry has near the 5,000-acre New River Forest tract. Kate Schaefer said immediately adjacent is an 800-acre tract called New Riverside owned by the County. Kate also referenced Buckfield/Pocotaligo (focus on forestry), Chelsea (focus on water quality), and New River State Forest, (focus on recreation). Chair McShane said Garnett (660 acres) is also being considered.

Committee Discussion Regarding Geographic Regions and Distribution of Funds:

Chuck Atkinson said Green Space is a new program. Staff knew at some point that changes would need to be made to the Ordinance. At a recent County Council meeting, questions were asked about the distribution of funds. Council asked staff to make a presentation in April on what the Ordinance says. Staff wants to make sure that what is presented is in lockstep with the Green Space Committee. Chuck referenced Section 38-202 (A) of the ordinance. To staff, all of the factors listed (I through V) are to accomplish the goal of ensuring that funds are equally distributed within the county's four geographic regions. Out-of-county expenditures are discussed in subsection B. This is the equitable piece. This section is very subjective. Is that the Committee's take on how this should be done, or is there another understanding of how this should be done?

Senator Davis said there needs to be some adjustments made to the authorizing state statute. He would like to make it a little less stringent in terms of putting things in precise buckets. At some point in time, it may be appropriate to acquire larger tracts of land in one part of the county given what's offered to the Committee, what the applications are, and what the Committee has the ability to do. Senator Davis said he thinks the way Chuck has presented this is appropriate and right and that the Green Space Committee has been living up to the spirit of that.

Tim Evans said that a million dollars in the Northern Region is not the same as a million dollars in the Southern Region. The Committee needs to look at impact, not chase dollars. It needs to take advantage of these big pieces when they come along.

Laurel Rhoten said she thinks equitable may be a better term than equal.

Carmen Avon Manning discussed her previous experience with state green space programs. She said it is difficult to consider projects on a first come/first serve basis; that doesn't mean the Committee is getting the best projects. Carmen said the Green Space Committee needs to review the wording very carefully, because the State Act says equal. Carmen said this section needs wordsmithing.

Senator Davis said he is working on an amendment to the state statute, and he would like the Committee's input before this goes forward. Senator Davis said if he could go back in time, he would not use the word "equal." The "legislative intent" is that land outside the county can be purchased, so clearly the Committee is to take a regional, wholistic approach to the expenditure of Green Space monies so that everyone can share in the benefit. These sorts of things don't

lend themselves to those dollar-types of precision. There will be disparities, because applications are submitted voluntarily by people willing to sell. In response to a question from Chair McShane, Senator Davis said he doesn't think the County needs to wait on the state to make changes to the ordinance. Looking at the committee process and the testimony and the reason behind this legislation, it gives latitude.

Peter Kristian said he thinks the Committee is in agreement that the term "equitable" needs to be front and center and "equal" is a rough road that will give the Committee trouble in the future.

In response to a question from Carmen Avon Manning, Senator Davis said if the Committee makes a change now, it will not impact the sales tax money that has already been collected. Senator Davis said everything the Green Space Committee has done is consistent and unassailable, but he recognizes the better practice is to have authorizing statute be explicit and precise.

Peter Kristian made a motion to recommend that County Council revise Section 38-202 (A), first sentence, and change the word "equally" to "equitably," so that it reads, "To ensure that funds are equitably distributed within the county . . ." The motion was seconded by Tim Evans. Brian Hulbert asked if there was an intent to include the amount of land being preserved in addition to being equitable financially. Chair McShane said no, the Committee purposefully stayed away from putting acreage in this because the acreage variation is so immense. The Committee always considered it financially. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

OTHER BUSINESS:

Buckwalter PUD Tracts 5A & 5B, Bluffton:

Chair McShane said the Committee extended the invitation to the Town of Bluffton to bring back Buckwalter Tracts 5A and 5B for conversation. Richardson LaBruce, legal counsel for the Town of Bluffton, said this is a project that the Committee has already approved and the Town of Bluffton has already closed on it. These tracts total about 240 acres. The Town recently acquired the Mooney tract.

Richardson used a map on the computer screen to orient the Committee. These properties are subject to the 9th amendment to the Buckwalter Development Agreement. This amendment was drafted 15-20 years ago. The amendment identified two future roadways--the north-south corridor and the 5B connector. The north-south connector was to be built by the developer of the Indian Hills property. To date, the Indian Hills property has not been developed, perhaps because of the obligation to build a very expensive roadway.

Richardson LaBruce said, in discussion regarding the language for the Green Space easement, County staff and the Green Space attorney had recommended a 10.18-acre cap on the road acreage. Because the development agreement predates any conservation easement and Town ownership, the Town doesn't have the ability to restrict the road acreage. The road has never been fully designed, so the Town doesn't know if it would have to be rerouted to avoid wetlands

or specimen trees. Therefore, the required acreage cannot be determined. The Town wanted some flexibility and fairness to County taxpayers, so the Town added some language to the covenants that in the event the road (if ever developed), exceeds 10.18 acres, the County would be paid back on a pro-rata basis. This was one of the major modifications. The Town provided a letter to the Committee that explains this in more detail.

Richardson LaBruce said in the revised draft covenants the Town has submitted, there will be no vertical development in the 240 acres except perhaps for a small restroom facility. Richardson said County staff had asked for more specificity regarding what uses would be permitted as “passive recreation.” These have been outlined in paragraph 6 on page 3.

In response to a question from Chair McShane, Chuck Atkinson said the discussions between County and Town staff has led to the draft of the covenants being discussed today. Chuck said County staff had some concern about some of what is in the current draft, but the Committee’s input is very important. Chair McShane said that one of the focus areas has been the definition of passive uses. Chair McShane asked if the Committee had any comment on what the Town has outlined as passive uses.

Carmen Avon Manning asked if the revised language about ponds would eliminate the possibility of using the Foothills property for stormwater control if the Town bought the Mooney property. Richardson LaBruce said yes, that eliminates the possibility and it was never the intent and the Town wanted to be very clear on this.

Senator Davis clarified that right now, the property is owned by the Town of Bluffton and is unincumbered by covenants. Right now, the Green Space Committee is looking at preserving it and conserving it and if this doesn’t move forward, the Town of Bluffton can do whatever it wants with it. Chair McShane said that is why the Committee enthusiastically invited the Town to come back and talk with them. Senator Davis said the Committee needs to be very mindful, given the importance of preserving this land, not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good. That is the lens needed to look at this.

In response to a question from Carmen Avon Manning, Richardson LaBruce said ballfields would not be allowed, as these would be considered active recreation.

Chair McShane said based on his experience, he did not consider horseback riding passive. There are a lot of associated issues including vehicle and trailer access, debris and safety. Tim Evans said horses are very hard on the environment—soil movement and sedimentation issues. It is not a very passive activity. Stephen Steese said this isn’t saying the Town is going to do it; it just allows the option.

Tim Evans said unmanned aerial recreational activities might be an issue. Most national parks are banning the use of drones.

Regarding the bottom of page 4, location of connector road, Richardson LaBruce said the Town wanted to provide more information and background. They wanted to craft a limitation for this roadway that would make it as narrow as possible yet still retain the obligation on Indian Hills Associates to build. The Town has added language that the Town would reimburse the County for any additional acreage over 10.18 acres.

Regarding the reimbursement price, Tim Evans asked if this should be the appraised value at the time (of road development). Chuck Atkinson said staff is comfortable with the language as is.

Richardson LaBruce said the road is only on Parcel 5A and the Mooney tract.

In response to a comment from Carmen Avon Manning regarding the connector road, Graeme Philp said he is comfortable with the language as is, as it includes reference to the 9th amendment as of the date of this agreement.

On page 5, paragraph 9, there was a proposed change to Total Net Acreage. Richardson LaBruce said the Town does not have a final survey yet. Much of the property is wetlands. The Town wanted to make sure it would not be so restrictive that there was no public benefit.

Regarding paragraph 14, Chair McShane recommended that wording be added that management and maintenance shall adhere to all appropriate state and federal law particularly as it pertains to threatened or endangered species.

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 Buckwalter PUD Tracts 5A, 5B, 5C, Town of Bluffton. Tim Evans seconded. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

The Committee was in Executive Session from 12:29 PM to 12:50 PM.

MATTERS ARISING OUT OF EXECUTIVE SESSION:

In response to a question from Carmen Avon Manning, Richardson LaBruce said there are no development rights associated with Foothills, so there are no development rights to be extinguished except for civic and institutional uses such as schools and civic buildings that would be permitted without development rights.

Carmen Avon Manning asked about the status of Parcel 5C. Richardson LaBruce said the project is still in due diligence. Carmen asked about Indian Hills. Richardson LaBruce said the Town has entered into an agreement to purchase it.

Senator Davis made a motion to recommend to County Council approval of the Green Space Program Grant Agreement as presented to the Green Space Committee, with the exception of the following: paragraph 6.A, last bullet point that defines passive recreation, the deletion of the following examples: bocce court, horseback riding, and other unmanned aerial recreational

activities. These uses would be excluded as examples of what passive recreation means. Vice Chair McElynn seconded. Brian Hulbert clarified that Senator Davis was referring to the Declaration of Real Property Covenant and Land Use Restrictions. Senator Davis said yes. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

Richardson LaBruce asked why it would need to go back to County Council. Chair McShane said because in the Committee's view, a significant change has been made to what was recommended to County Council. It's to approve the fact that the grant had been reported as no longer being accepted and now is brought back to be accepted with the recommendation from the Committee. So, it is a courtesy to Council that the Committee brings this back.

Chuck Atkinson said County Council authorized the Administrator to negotiate the terms based on the application that was submitted. Because there have been material changes to the application, he said this will go directly back to Council for a resolution--one reading and done, unless Council has issues.

In response to a question from Stephen Steese, Graeme Philp said the original application excluded the right-of-way (10.18 acres) from what would be subject to covenants. In the current document, the Town has asked for the right to acquire additional acreage on top of the 10.18 acres and is asking for the right to buy that acreage based on a formula that is the appraised value of the property divided by the total number of acres. To clarify, it is not divided by the total number of highland acres which would be \$30,000 per acre approximately, whereas based on total acres, it is approximately \$9,841. It was an ask that had not been approved by the Green Space Committee and not approved by County Council. It's not just the grant that was approved, it's that the application was approved and there is change to the application.

Upcoming meeting dates for applications in the pipeline are April 6 for the Natural Resources Committee and April 13 for County Council. The next Green Space Committee meeting is April 10.

Peter Kristian said to the Bluffton applicants that everyone is very encouraged and very much wants to move that project forward; this is just crossing Ts and dotting Is, but the Committee is very supportive of this moving forward.

ADJOURNMENT:

The meeting was adjourned at 1:06 PM.

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