

MINUTES

Green Space Advisory Committee

April 10, 2026, 1:00 PM, Bluffton Branch Library, 120 Palmetto Way

CALL TO ORDER:

Chair McShane called the meeting to order at 1:29 PM. 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:

Timothy Evans

Larry McElynn, Vice Chair

T. Peter Kristian

Michael McShane, Chair

Carmen Avon Manning

Laurel Rhoten

COMMITTEE MEMBERS ABSENT:

Senator Tom Davis

STAFF MEMBERS PRESENT:

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

Graeme Philp, Attorney, Graybill, Lansche & Vinzani (virtual)

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

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

Bob Crimian, Coastal Conservation League

Kate Schaefer, representing Beaufort County Open Land Trust

APPROVAL OF AGENDA:

Vice Chair McElynn made a motion to approve the agenda. Laurel Rhoten seconded. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

REVIEW OF MINUTES – March 13, 2026:

Peter Kristian made a motion to adopt the minutes of the March 13, 2026 meeting. Tim Evans seconded. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Joy Coe asked to confirm the status of the Foothills property. Chair McShane said that would be done during project updates.

EXISTING APPLICATIONS

Fee Simple Application: New River Forest, Town of Bluffton:

David Bishop, TNC, applicant, provided an update on project due diligence. The Phase 1 and title work will be completed shortly. Everything is moving forward as expected. Mark Davis said the county ordered appraisal in under way and should be completed soon.

Tim Evans provided a summary of the site visit. Tim asked where there is another 5,000-acre block of property south of the Broad River that could be made available for public access. There is none. This is a one-of-a-kind opportunity that would likely not come around again, especially at this price. The road and infrastructure system are fantastic. In terms of a recreational asset, with the school next door and another one being built, and with the proximity to Bluffton, this is an asset. Tim said that recreationally, he does not think there are any other options on the table or will be in the future that could compare to what the Committee is looking at right now.

Peter Kristian said he agreed with Tim wholeheartedly on his assessment of the property. This is a unique property, and one is never going to find a parcel of land that large in this area. There are currently no development rights, but there could be development rights assigned to it in the future. This would protect the property in perpetuity.

Carmen Avon Manning noted there are many amendments to the PUD agreements on the Town's web site. There is a development agreement and zoning with the Town of Bluffton.

Chair McShane said that zoning is subject to the whims of the town council. It may offer some resistance to development today, but not in perpetuity.

Carmen Avon Manning said the property is beautiful. It would allow a lot of different types of people to use it. It is well-conserved. Because of the size of the property, it is a lot of money - a big chunk of the Green Space pot. She asked if this is the right way to spend that money. The concern is the balance of taking advantage of the opportunity versus the value overall for the community. The Committee has not heard from residents of Palmetto Bluff. The 800 acres that the County owns has not been developed; the road is supposed to be put in by the developer when that section is complete. That's how the residents would have access.

Kate Schaefer, OLT, representing the applicant, said there is \$1 million in the Rural & Critical account that was originally designed to put toward that road. It was to be a joint project with the developer. Kate said these types of projects could take a long time. The benefit of the New River project is that the road is already built. This New River project provides access to the County's 800 acres. Kate said this is a worthwhile investment right now, knowing that some of it will be reimbursed and doesn't compete with the ability to address other things that might come up in the next 18 months.

Carmen Avon Manning said a passive park was the last thing the residents of Bluffton wanted when asked during the Greenprint process. In Bluffton, parents want ball fields. Regarding finances, Carmen heard what the Forestry representative said but is not sure about this. After saying that Council Member Glover also mentioned losing tax revenue, she asked how this is going to balance out.

Chair McShane said loss of property tax revenue is typical when the County or a non-profit acquires property. Currently, the property is assessed at agricultural value which is the minimum value. The cost to the County to support services to that property, if developed, would be far greater than the revenue lost under the current value. This also would be a way to bring the 800 acres the County owns under broader management and provide public access. Regarding being shovel ready, there is existing infrastructure, a good management plan and a resilience component.

Vice Chair McElynn said this is a very unique situation—5,000 acres with infrastructure, surrounded by development. This would facilitate access to the County's 800 acres which was purchased in 2008 and nothing to date has happened. This project would give the public access to the 800 acres and 13 miles of shoreline of the New River. It is also adjacent to May River High School. Regarding investors, there is a principal investor and there may be more. There are so many positive things about this project in addition to keeping it from possible future development. This is a resource that will become a legacy project, and people will thank this Committee in the future.

Chair McShane reviewed slides on the computer screen that summarized the project — 4,927 acres; 13 miles of frontage on the New River; next to 800 acres owned by the County; several habitats; a \$42 million purchase price. This is the single-largest opportunity in the southern part of the County and is actively being marketed.

Chair McShane reviewed a slide that outlined the process: buy (TNC), hold (TNC donates easement to OLT), transfer (TNC transfers property to SC Forestry Commission); open to the public. It would be a 50-50 base acquisition with the state. Chair McShane said this is a little leap of faith, but one that he is willing to take. Chair McShane then outlined how funding for the purchase would work.

Brian Hulbert said there was discussion about having cross-country races for the schools and if so, should there be an easement given to the County to ensure that access. Chair McShane said he thought the Forestry Commission would be very interested in what the community wants to see happen. David Bishop said that wish list could be started during TNC's holding period. It has been his experience that the Forestry Commission is very flexible to work with. Tim Evans said the Forestry Commission sees this as a recreation first property versus a timber property.

David Bishop said regarding funding, the biggest partner is the state, but there could be other funding opportunities from federal grants.

Chair McShane said he would like to give confidence to our partners to move forward and so he would like a motion on this today.

Vice Chair McElynn said he thinks the number of Council members on the site visit was a representation of Council's interest.

Tim Evans made a motion to continue the due diligence process and any earnest money that might be needed by our partner to be added as a reimbursable component of the due diligence process. Vice Chair McElynn seconded the motion.

In response to a question from Peter Kristian, Chair McShane said he would be reporting on this motion to County Council on Monday. This is not a final recommendation; the Committee will need another motion on this in the future.

Chair McShane repeated the motion: "To continue to do due diligence process with the addition to include a discussion on earnest money that might be necessary to put the property under contract by our partner, that becomes a reimbursable component of the due diligence back to the County."

After discussion by the Committee, Tim Evans amended the motion with "not to exceed \$200,000." Vice Chair McElynn accepted the amendment to the motion. Chair McShane clarified that Green Space is asking for additional due diligence money for the project. The vote to approve the motion was unanimous.

Brian Hulbert and Vice Chair McElynn discussed how the process would work with County Council.

Carmen Avon Manning clarified with Chair McShane that the Forestry money is an appropriation, not a grant. Chair McShane said there may be federal dollars available in the future. Laurel Rhoten said the Department of War has regional recreational properties.

David Bishop said this may be the biggest property conservation transaction on a single property in the history of South Carolina. Mark Davis noted that because of the Green Space Program and the revenue that the penny sales tax generates, the County is in a position to do this.

In response to a question from Carmen Avon Manning, Chair McShane said the Green Space Act is available to all counties in the state.

OTHER BUSINESS

Ordinance Amendment Update:

Brian Hulbert said the Natural Resources Committee recommended approval of the ordinance change. It will be heard at Council's meeting on Monday for first reading. Final approval will be at the first Council meeting in May (May 11).

Project Updates:

The project update spreadsheet was displayed on the computer screen. Kate Schaefer provided updates on OLT applications. In response to a comment from Kate Schaefer, Tim Evans said the importance of roadside and river buffers was made clear during discussions of applications.

In response to a question from Carmen Avon Manning, Kate Schaefer said that recreational hunting is typically permitted on private property with easements.

Mark Davis reviewed the status of the other projects.

Chair McShane asked that the dates the Natural Resources Committee approved due diligence be added to the spreadsheet.

Chair McShane asked for a drop-down on the spreadsheet that shows what comprises allocated projects, funded projects, etc.

Joy Coe asked if the Town of Bluffton supports the New River project. Kate Schaefer said yes, they have provided a letter of support.

The Committee discussed scheduling a special called meeting for Friday, May 8.

ADJOURNMENT:

The meeting was adjourned at 2:48 PM.

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