

Sulka, Newton: Job growth, May River protection go together

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Beaufort County Council Chairman Weston Newton

Bluffton Mayor Lisa Sulka and Beaufort County Council Chairman Weston Newton say the town and county together are making progress for jobs growth, economic diversification and reclaiming the May River from pollution.

They say economic growth and environmental protection can and must happen together, because the unique Lowcountry environment makes the county and town great and is a selling point.

From somewhat different angles, this theme was a focus of remarks the two made last week in a freewheeling question and answer session at the Hilton Head Island-Bluffton Chamber of Commerce 16th annual State of the Region event.

Attorney David Tigges, chamber board chairman, directed the questions that came from the audience of about 700 people in The Westin Hilton Head Island Resort & Spa banquet room.

Newton and Sulka indicated the Bluffton area's phenomenal growth caught local governments off guard despite best intentions to keep it from polluting the May River.

The state Department of Health and Environmental Control last year closed shellfish harvesting in the May River headwaters because of high fecal coliform readings and continued the closures this harvesting season. The readings indicate bacteria levels exceeding U.S. Food and Drug Administration safety levels for human consumption.

Both the county and town have fashioned new stormwater runoff controls designed to reduce the volume of freshwater draining into the river from new development.

Newton said keeping the estuary's natural salinity is an essential part of a turnaround.

He said the May River is a "prime example" of things gone wrong. Despite 10 years of a mantra to "protect the river; protect the river ... we've closed almost half of it to shellfishing."

He said it was the latest example of downgrade that began with the closing of Okatie River oyster beds.

He said he is a big advocate of drainage volume control to keep fresh water from diluting saltwater estuaries.

Without getting a handle on runoff, he said, in the next 10 years the county risked transforming estuaries like the May River to places where alligators, bream and bass replace oysters, crabs and shrimp.

Newton said decennial census counts track the county's population growth from about 86,000 in 1990 to 120,000 in 2000 to 163,000 in 2010.

With the 2010 count, growth in the greater Bluffton area will shift the majority of County Council seats from northern Beaufort County to south of the Broad River.

Sulka said the town proper, with annexation and population growth, grew 883 percent from the 2000 census to the April 2010 census count of 12,530 residents and the area is now addressing unexpected consequences on the May River.

"We can strike a balance between protecting the environment and recruiting industry," particularly in the aerospace field, Newton said.

Local governments' job, he said, should be to provide appropriate tools and not obstacles to moving economic development forward.

He said that is the direction being taken with the retooled Lowcountry Economic Alliance, through which Beaufort and Jasper County government and business leaders are focusing on regional development.

Sulka said the town is working on its "action plan" to improve the river with a variety of projects, and "Let's brag about what we're doing right."

She said town leaders know the river's health is important. "My children ate oysters (from the river) at 3 years old," she said. "They want to come home because they want to be in it."

The mayor also said the Town Council has completed "an 18-month process of overhauling our entire development code."

She said the revised Unified Development Ordinance "is trying to get development off the river." The model will encourage owners of undeveloped land near the river to use transferable development rights to shift to inland areas.

"We know where we want our growth. Let's try to get development off the river" and into areas like Buckwalter, she said.

Sulka said the action plan is "to try to correct what has happened" and keep the river from degrading.

She noted it's an issue everywhere in Beaufort County where "we're 54 percent water."

When her time was up, Sulka urged Tigges to "give me one more minute, because I didn't use all of my minutes in the past few years."

Another focus needs to be on "jobs, jobs, jobs," she said.

As part of recruiting, "you all need to start bragging about our schools," she said, both public and private.

The University of South Carolina Beaufort and Technical College of the Lowcountry south-county campuses are great resources that Bluffton did not have 10 years ago.

For example, she said parents could get their children excited about opportunities in entrepreneurship and biotechnology in local higher learning, such as the USCB water laboratory, a partner in the May River monitoring efforts.

To show the audience, Sulka raised in her hands a bumper sticker reading: "Beaufort County schools — good for kids, good for business."

She said, "I think we've got to start with our own school kids," so they'll stay here and go to college. "Wouldn't that be great?"

Sulka said that is a good way to help economic development.

She also heralded the town's partnership in a Clemson University pilot project to incubate emerging technology companies, for which the Town Council last Tuesday created a nonprofit to run the enterprise.

Newton said the area needs to address diversification to make up for lost construction industry jobs. In 2005, he said, 13 percent of the county's population was in the construction industry with a \$250 million payroll. In 2010, the number had dropped by half and the payroll was \$114 million.

"What happens at build-out?" Newton said, asking if there would be a "mass exodus."

He said leaders have talked about diversification for a number of years. With the economic downturn and refocusing, "we have the opportunity now to really talk about regionalism" and prepare for build-out and diversify.

In doing that, he said he "truly believes" the area can be both pro-business and pro-environment.

He said people didn't move to Beaufort County because they couldn't eat shellfish right out of the river, and they won't if that becomes true.

He said it's an economic issue, and people only need to look at the Chesapeake Bay to see how much money can be spent when things go completely wrong.

Hilton Head Mayor Drew Laughlin also took questions. He talked about his town's moves to become more business friendly and said big initiatives coming up will deal with redeveloping the Mall at Shelter Cove and Coligny Plaza.

TRACKING GROWTH

The 2010 U.S. Census showed the town of Bluffton's population boomed in the past decade. The April 2010 count recorded 12,530 residents - an 883 percent jump from 1,275 in 2000.

It was the third-highest percentage change in the state. And that does not count the growth in unincorporated Bluffton Township, including Sun City.

Beaufort County was the fourth fastest-growing county in the state - behind York, Horry and Dorchester. The county's population increased from 120,937 in 2000 to 162,233 in 2010 - or 34 percent.