

D. Paul Sommerville

October 22, 2014

Hilton Head Island-Bluffton Chamber of Commerce—State of the Region

Hello, everyone. Good afternoon. I want to take a moment to thank Bill Miles and the Hilton Head Island-Bluffton Chamber of Commerce for hosting this wonderful annual event. I also want to thank Senator Lindsey Graham, my colleagues, and other state and local leaders for their participation today. We are pressed for time, so I will briefly mention ten points on the movements of Beaufort County Council as related to the state of our region.

- First, despite the tough economy, Beaufort County ended this past fiscal year with a balanced budget and an increase to our reserve fund. Additionally, we have preserved our bond and credit ratings at double A plus, saving millions in potential interest charges.
- We have ongoing road and infrastructure improvement projects including the \$15 million widening of SC 170 and \$40 million Bluffton Parkway flyover project, which once completed will help to relieve congestion on US 278 and provide an alternate hurricane evacuation route to I-95.
- Since we last met, the County completed a \$14 million renovation to the County courthouse and opened the County's first coroner's facility. Beaufort County Council approved funding for the addition of two new ambulances and ten new chest-compression devices for our paramedics to more accurately administer CPR. We also approved \$2.5 million in software upgrades for public safety systems, such as dispatch.
- Beaufort County Council continues its partnership with our military leaders and partner agencies to help ensure the continued economic development of our area. After 17 years away, we helped welcome back personnel and their families from the F-35B training squadron and saw the arrival of the new F-35B Joint Strike Fighter. This influx injects millions into our economy, supporting countless local businesses.
- Beaufort County is close to finalizing our long-awaited Community Development Code. The new code will formalize a number of multi-jurisdictional common goals and objectives related to managing growth, preserving rural areas and creating more compact, walkable, mixed-use urban areas throughout the County.

- Beaufort County Council recently voted to put a referendum on the November ballot to raise another \$20 million for land preservation. Over the years, voters have approved three referendums that raised \$110 million allowing for the conservation of more than 22,000 acres of vulnerable lands for generations to come.
- Beaufort County Council continues to be proactive in addressing stormwater runoff, as water quality preservation affects our commercial fishing industry, promotes tourism, protects recreational opportunities, and maintains our quality of life. The County is currently working with our municipalities as we all take steps to implement the Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System, known as MS4. This program is designed to help control stormwater runoff thereby protecting our waterways.
- In addition to providing transparency into our official proceedings, The Beaufort County Channel also offers a variety of educational shows, such as our emmy-nominated “Coastal Kingdom”. This series takes viewers on a journey through some of our richest and most diverse habitats. We are so pleased that “Coastal Kingdom” has been picked up by SC ETV, which puts Beaufort County in 100% of the state’s television market and parts of Georgia too.
- Beaufort County Council continues to support efforts promoting Beaufort County as a top location for cultural heritage tourism. Beaufort County sits at the heart of the Gullah-Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, which has been designated as a national heritage area by Congress. We are also home to the historic sites of Mitchelville, America’s first Freedmen’s town, and Santa Elena, North America’s first colonial capital. Supporting the growth and promotion of our historic sites has a direct impact on our economic development. To that end, Beaufort County Council is preparing to debut a website about historic Mitchelville. Also, we recently invited the Director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture to visit the County for a firsthand glimpse into our cultural heritage. Imagine the potential benefits of partnering with the Smithsonian and one day seeing Beaufort County have a presence in a national exhibit visited by millions of people each year from around the world.
- Finally, as many of you know, Act 388 prevents South Carolina’s school districts from taxing primary residences for operations and shifts the burden entirely to owners of second homes and businesses. Beaufort County is unique because our property tax base relies heavily on rental and commercial property. An added concern is that secondary homeowners are allowed to convert their properties to primary status, exempting them as well. This dynamic has caused the school district’s tax base to shrink drastically and left the County having to raise the millage rate to generate the money lost through conversions, which can only lead to even more secondary homeowners converting their properties. Consequently, Beaufort County Council is working in partnership with the school district to navigate the inequities of Act 388 and to enhance the utilization of dollars for local education.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Beaufort County Council is eager to do our part to ensure that the County’s future is bright. Going forward, we look forward to being your innovative leader.