

COASTAL OBSERVER

Vol. XXXIX No. 24

Pawleys Island, South Carolina ~ November 26, 2020

50 cents



Photos by Charles Swenson/Coastal Observer

A pond and wetlands make up a portion of the site now zoned for an office park and warehouses.

COASTAL MONTESSORI

Board names interim after drawing fire for ousting new director

BY CHRIS SOKOLOSKI
COASTAL OBSERVER

One week after firing its director, the Coastal Montessori Charter School board named Rosemary Gray as interim director.

"I will work hard for you and with you," Gray said after the announcement on Monday. She promised to continue to move the school forward.

Gray is a retired educator with 33 years of experience and is currently a real estate agent with the Litchfield Co.

She was an English teacher, principal at Georgetown Middle School and an assistant principal at Georgetown High School. She will serve as interim director at least until the end of the school year.

Gray will lead the school's efforts to come up with a reopening plan. Students have been learning virtually since the start of the school year.

Former director Gene Nicastro said in an email last week he was "totally surprised" by the board's action.

He said he had "overwhelming, positive support of the staff and leadership toward the implementation of systems and processes to improve the organization." But he added that he "recognizes that the board has the ability to move in a different direction" and wished the school "continued success in the future."

The charter school board has given no reason for its decision.

In a statement this week, the board said it "is not going to make any further public comments about Dr. Nicastro's confidential personnel matter."

The board chose Gray following an executive session on Monday. After making the announcement in the school's Grand Hall, **SEE "ZONING," PAGE 3** **SEE "CHARTER," PAGE 2**

LAND USE | Tech park rezoning

0 to 182 units? Commission says no, 5-0

BY CHARLES SWENSON
COASTAL OBSERVER

Swapping 167,000 square feet of planned commercial development at Pawleys Island for 182 apartments would run counter to the goals of Georgetown County's future land-use plan, members of the Planning Commission say.

The commission voted 5-0 last week against a zoning change to allow residential development on 14.4 acres on Petigru Drive that the county bought in 2016 for a tech park. The county planned to partner with the tech firm Mercom on the project, but had to look for other partners after the firm ran into financial problems in 2018.

The nonprofit Georgetown County Economic Development Alliance received a \$950,000 loan from Santee Cooper to fund the purchase. After rejecting an offer from Graycliff Capital Partners to buy the property last fall, the alliance board decided earlier this year to recommend the sale.



Johnny Ford, who lives near the site, questions traffic data.

Graycliff offered \$1.38 million for the property.

"This site, as is, right now is zoned for 167,000 feet of office space," Seth Peterson, Graycliff's development director, told the commission. "It's high density right now."

The change to residential use

would reduce the number of daily car trips, increase the amount of open space and retain more trees, he said.

"We're trying to provide what we consider is a better option for the community," Peterson said.

The commission deferred a vote on the project last month

to get more information about the traffic study commissioned by Graycliff and its stormwater plans.

Walter Warren, an engineer with Thomas and Hutton, said the apartment project would have better storage capacity for stormwater than the commercial project, for which a plan had already been approved.

"We talk about density versus intensity," Warren said.

Stuart Day, a traffic engineer, with Stantec, said traffic would be reduced from 2,448 daily trips to 1,062 daily trips with residential development. He projected about half of the peak traffic would get to Highway 17 along Commerce Drive rather than the heavily traveled Waverly and Martin Luther King roads.

"I don't agree with that," commission member Sandra Bundy said.

Commission member Robert Davis said it was important to look at how the project would **SEE "ZONING," PAGE 3**

GROWTH

County will start over with land plan update

BY CHARLES SWENSON
COASTAL OBSERVER

The 10-year update of Georgetown County's land-use plan that was due three years ago will stretch into another year as planners restart the process to include more public input.

"We want broad-based input from the public," said Holly Richardson, the county planning director.

The input provided at workshops last month was that there wasn't enough public involvement in the process that began before the coronavirus pandemic. The only topic that received more comment was the need to maintain low density growth.

The Planning Commission, which is responsible for developing the plan, approved a three-phase process proposed by Richardson that will start with collecting comments from a wider range of interests. The first step will be an online survey.

The results will go to the Planning Commission for review along with maps of areas on Wac-



Charles Swenson/Coastal Observer

Suggestions for the plan stack up at a workshop last month.

camaw Neck zoned for high-density development and a watershed study of Murrells Inlet.

Citizen workshops to review that information will be held in Murrells Inlet, the Pawleys Island-Litchfield area and the western part of the county.

In the second phase, the commission will rewrite the land-use plan, citizen workshops will re-

view the work and the commission will make any revisions.

"It's important to be flexible and adapt as those issues come up," Richardson said.

The final phase includes a public hearing and a vote by the commission and a hearing and approval by County Council. No time line has been set. "We have a small staff," Richardson said.

UTILITIES

Top users will pay more under new water district rates

BY CHARLES SWENSON
COASTAL OBSERVER

Rates for the average Georgetown County Water and Sewer District customer will rise 2.8 percent under a schedule up for approval by the utility's board next month. Rates for high-volume users will rise more than twice that much.

Under the current rate schedule, the rate for water and sewer use rises \$1.25 a year for every 1,000 gallons no matter how much water a customer uses. "It's regressive," said Ray Gagnon, the district's executive director. "The whole idea of this is to get less regressive."

A rate study completed this fall also showed that the average customer uses 4,000 to 5,000 gallons a month. That results in a monthly bill of \$45.23, including customer charges and availability charges, for a customer using 5,000 gallons. That bill rises to \$46.48 under the new schedule.

A customer who uses 9,000 gallons or more, will see a 6.6 percent increase. Only 12 percent of the district's more than 24,000 customers use that much water.

"We're getting more money from higher users," Gagnon said.

It's a good way to promote water conservation, he added.

The proposed schedule shows rates continuing to rise by about 4 percent annually for all users through 2025.

The district's board plans to hold a public hearing on the new rate plan next month. A virtual meeting is scheduled for Dec. 10.

The district traditionally updates its rates at the start of its fiscal year in July. That was delayed this year by the coronavirus pandemic.

The new rates also change the district's impact fees.

When the district was created by the state legislature as a special-purpose district in 1967, it served the Waccamaw Neck.

SEE "WATER," PAGE 2

INSIDE THIS ISSUE



Light work: Brookgreen holiday display will be quieter, but no less vivid. **SECOND FRONT**

Environment: Suit over North Inlet marshland on hold during appeal. **PAGE 3**

Arts: Inlet resident makes film debut. **PAGE 8**



Obituaries	2
Crime	5
Opinion	6
Crossword	10
Classifieds	11
Sports	14

Online
coastalobserver.com



Notes to our readers

Holiday schedule: This week's edition went to press a day early to accommodate Thanksgiving printing and postal schedules. The Coastal Observer office will be closed Nov. 26-29.

Price change: With the Dec. 3 edition, the price of the Coastal Observer will increase to \$1.