

COASTAL OBSERVER

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Outcry over library delays approval of sales tax surplus plan

BY CHARLES SWENSON
COASTAL OBSERVER

Work to complete the Bike the Neck path along Waverly Road and to install devices that give fire and rescue vehicles priority at traffic signals will be delayed at least a month while County Council members outside the Waccamaw Neck meet with constituents who are upset about capital improvement projects in

their districts.

The council agreed in September to allocate \$1 million of surplus revenue from a capital improvement sales tax to each of the seven council districts. Members turned in a list of projects in October so county staff could develop cost estimates. A list of 20 projects was adopted earlier this month and due for final approval this week.

But residents from neighbor-

hoods west of the city of Georgetown pleaded with the council to defer action because they wanted the money in their district spent on recreation and drainage projects. Council Member Lillie Jean Johnson, who represents District 4, earmarked the money to a renovation and expansion of the Georgetown Library.

Teddy Wilson, a Sampit resident, asked for time to meet with District 3 Council Member Ever-

ett Carolina about his proposal to spend \$335,000 on tennis courts in the local park.

Wesley Gibson, a leader of Citizens for Progress, said residents in the Big Dam Swamp neighborhood in the northwestern corner of the county were excited about the idea that \$650,000 would be spent on a center for senior citizens. Then they found out the project was a recycling center in Council District 5.

"Is this a positive, impactful project in the community? They don't think so," Gibson said.

The money comes from a 1-cent sales tax approved by voters in 2014. It was estimated to raise \$28.2 million for a list of projects, including dredging at Murrells Inlet, road improvements and rural fire stations. Over the four years that the tax was collected, it brought in an

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ENVIRONMENT

Planners move ahead with tougher tree rules

BY CHARLES SWENSON
COASTAL OBSERVER

While Georgetown County continues to look for ways to protect trees from falling to new development, members of the Planning Commission are concerned that the ordinance lacks teeth.

The current fine for violations of the tree protection ordinance is \$500 per tree. The county can also require mitigation, said Holly Richardson, the planning director.

She outlined a package of options to the commission last week that would expand tree protection.

"Are we going up on the cost," Elizabeth Krauss, who chairs the commission, asked.

Raising the \$500 fine isn't among the options.

"I'm sad that we can't have it more than that because the value's in the tree before it's cut," commission member Sandra Bundy said.

Richardson said the county is limited by state law in the fines it can levy.

The problems that she sees are primarily in the gaps in the existing ordinance. On the Waccamaw Neck, trees on property zoned for commercial or multi-family use can be cut with a permit if "no practical alternatives for the reasonable use of the

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Charles Swenson/Coastal Observer

Rising waters | Margie Fullerton, left, and Perry Roe look for shells as the tide rises over a sand spit at the north end of Pawleys Island. The weekend weather was a break from days of rain that left water rising in the rivers.

TOURISM

Rise in visitors stood out during tough year for S.C.

BY CHRIS SOKOLOSKI
COASTAL OBSERVER

The COVID-19 pandemic kept people from visiting most of South Carolina in 2020, but not Georgetown County.

While the statewide occupancy rate on short-term rentals was down by 23 percent in the last seven months of 2020, Georgetown County saw an 11.5 percent increase.

"It was great," Will Dieter, an owner of The Dieter Co. said. "What a pleasant surprise during a challenging time."

"The fall actually surprised me," Betsy Altman, owner of Pawleys Island Realty, said. "The fall was good."

Georgetown, Colleton and Beaufort were the only counties in the state to see an increase in accommodations taxes collected in 2020. The money comes from a 2 percent state tax on short-term rentals. It is returned to counties for tourism-related projects and expenses.

Ninety-eight percent of the people who canceled their reservations with Pawleys Island Realty because of the pandemic rescheduled for another time, Altman said. Agents will reach out to those who didn't rebook at the end of this year to see if they have plans for 2022.

"Hopefully they'll come back and miss one year only," Altman said.

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Charles Swenson/Coastal Observer

Georgetown was one of three counties in the state to see a rise in tourism taxes.

ELECTION 2022 | Drawing new lines

Start early, and local, for redistricting, group says

BY CHARLES SWENSON
COASTAL OBSERVER

Delays in reporting the count from the 2020 Census means the process of redrawing election districts is still at least six months away. But a public-interest group is urging members to start early to press officials to create districts that are compact, contiguous and communities of interest.

"The people who draw the lines have an incentive to help themselves," said Shayna Howell, who co-chairs the redistricting workgroup for the S.C. League of Women Voters. She met online this week with the Georgetown and Horry county chapters to encourage them to start contacting those lawmakers.

The census will be used to redraw everything from congressional districts to local councils. The numbers are usually available in the spring. Because the coronavirus pandemic delayed



Charles Swenson/Coastal Observer

Primary voters at Waccamaw High. District lines need to change for the 2022 congressional, statehouse and local elections

last year's count, the release was pushed back, first to July and then until September.

The legislature will adopt new congressional district as well as

state House and Senate districts. The League, which is nonpartisan, supports an independent redistricting commission. Bills in

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CORONAVIRUS | The vaccine

Father campaigns to get Down syndrome in Phase 1a

BY CHRIS SOKOLOSKI
COASTAL OBSERVER

Last month, Ken Leach drove from his home in Heritage Plantation to Charleston so he and his wife and son could get the COVID-19 vaccination.

Leach read all the instructions on the Medical University of South Carolina website before making the appointments. He thought that Corey, who is 41, qualified because he has Down syndrome, and they qualified because they are Corey's caregivers.

The family was turned away.

"The woman behind the counter at MUSC seemed more inclined to turn people away than give out vaccines," Leach said. "He has to be under 16, he has to be on a ventilator and a bunch of other stuff that wasn't anywhere on their website."



Ken Leach

Corey Leach with Gov. Henry McMaster in 2018.

It turns out the information on the MUSC website about people with disabilities

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The clinic: Getting vaccine into arms is a simple process. Getting the vaccine is more difficult.

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