

# COASTAL OBSERVER

Vol. XLIII No. 7

Pawleys Island, South Carolina ~ July 25, 2024

\$1.50

## Move to cut density follows approval of land plan

BY CHARLES SWENSON  
COASTAL OBSERVER

Georgetown County will move quickly to reduce the number of dwellings allowed in its highest density zoning district after this week's approval of an updated land use plan.

The top limit of 16 units an acre will be reduced to 12, "basically to match that to the future land use map," County Council Member Stella Mercado said.



**Council Member Bob Anderson votes against the land use update.**

The council voted unanimously to start the process to update its zoning ordinance to align with the new plan, starting with the change to the density limits in its "general residential" zoning district. The county last updated the land use element of its comprehensive plan in 2007. State

law requires that the plan be updated every 10 years and reviewed every five years.

The county began work to update the land use element in 2019. The process was interrupted by the pandemic and by criticism that it lacked adequate public input. The county hired consultants last year to help complete the work.

The update drew opposition from the citizens group Keep It Green, which calculated that

changes to the land use maps, which provided the legal basis for zoning decisions, would increase residential density on the Waccamaw Neck. Hundreds of people attended public hearings before the Planning Commission in April and before the council last month to ask that the plan be changed.

The council moved its meeting this week to the Howard Center in anticipation of a  
**SEE "LAND USE," PAGE 4**



Photos by Charles Swenson/Coastal Observer

Diana Eastman stretches to reach the bottom of a sea turtle nest during the the first nest inventory of the year on Pawleys Island.

ENVIRONMENT | Sea turtles

## Numbers down for early season

BY CHRIS SOKOLOSKI  
COASTAL OBSERVER

The number of sea turtles nests along the South Carolina coast is lagging behind last year.

"It's a little bit slower than years past but we still have the month of August to go through," said Rick Scott, who oversees the South Carolina United Turtle Enthusiasts, a group of volunteers who patrol beaches at dawn looking for nests. "The overall numbers are pretty low."

Pawleys Island has had  
**SEE "TURTLES," PAGE 2**



The inventory, unusual for July, draws a crowd to watch and learn from SCUTE volunteers.

EDUCATION

## Cellphone ban won't faze Waccamaw Middle staff

BY CHRIS SOKOLOSKI  
COASTAL OBSERVER

While the Georgetown County School District grapples with a state mandate that students not have access to cellphones during the school day, it's old news to one school.

Waccamaw Middle School banned students from having cellphones two years ago. Lockers at the school are now used to store cellphones, not school books.

Principal Ginny Haynes believes the policy is "directly connected" to the rise in test scores because students are more engaged in the classroom.

"We just finished up our second year without cellphones and truly our scores shot up. We haven't had a lot of pushback from our parents, we haven't had a lot of discipline with phones," Haynes said. "Now the state is following suit because it's in the best interest of the children."

On the state report cards, test scores for seventh-graders increased six points in English/language arts and six points in math from 2022 to 2023. For eighth-graders, the increase in the same time period was 32 points in English/language arts and nine points in math.

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SALES TAX

## Committee at work to campaign for passage of two referendums

BY CHARLES SWENSON  
COASTAL OBSERVER

A shakeup in the U.S. presidential election will be felt in Georgetown County, where a group assembled by the Chamber of Commerce is preparing to pitch a pair of 1-cent sales tax referendums to voters in November.

"It's challenging in a presidential election year anyway," said Beth Stedman, the chamber president. "The committee has discussed strategies and ways to cut through the noise to get the message out."

President Joe Biden's announcement over the weekend

that he was withdrawing as the Democratic Party nominee in favor of Vice President Kamala Harris is expected to spark new interest in the race with former President Donald Trump.

"That's a big factor," said Kim Fox, who led the committee that campaigned successfully for a capital projects sales tax in 2014. "I'm not sure if it's positive or negative."

She owns Fox Marketing and among the volunteers working with the committee to support a new capital projects tax and an additional 1-cent local option sales tax that will be used primarily to offset county  
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TRANSPORTATION | Safe Streets 4 All

## Federal grant funds plan to reduce fatalities on region's roads

BY CHARLES SWENSON  
COASTAL OBSERVER

There were over 55,000 crashes on roads in Georgetown and Horry counties between 2019 and 2023; 269 were fatal. Among the dead were 86 cyclists or pedestrians.

State and local transportation agencies have data on each of the crashes, but at a meeting next month they are looking for public input about ways to make the roads safer.

"You can fall in love with the data, and it's not necessarily everything," said Mark Hoeweler, executive director of the Grand Strand Area Transportation Study.

The intergovernmental group is responsible for allo-



Charles Swenson/Coastal Observer

A meeting Aug. 5 will seek input on safety concerns.

cating federal funds for transportation projects in the region and Brunswick County, N.C. In 2022, it received \$725,000 from a federal Safe Streets 4 All grant and state matching funds to create an action plan to reduce fatalities.

That plan is being developed by AECOM, the engineering firm that updated a study of the Highway 17 corridor on the Waccamaw Neck. Once completed, the plan will allow GSATS to seek additional funds for improvement projects.

That could be up to \$30 million for an "implementation project," Hoeweler said, provided they could come up with the \$6 million local match.

One thing that the consultants hope to gather from the

public is "hard braking data." Those are places where drivers apply the brakes suddenly, he said, not necessarily places where crashes occur.

They are also trying to gather "near miss data," which could require setting up cameras or reviewing footage from existing traffic cameras.

The meeting Aug. 5 at the Waccamaw Library is a chance for people to explain "where they think there are issues and problems," Hoeweler said.

The goal of the federal grant is to eliminate fatalities. Hoeweler said that may not be realistic.

A review of the accident data showed that a large portion were due to speeding,  
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