

COASTAL OBSERVER

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County's growing surplus seen as sign of financial strength

BY CHARLES SWENSON
COASTAL OBSERVER

Georgetown County continues to save money for a rainy day, like the ones that come with hurricanes.

The surplus in the county's general fund increased by \$5 million last year, according to an annual audit, and at \$25.9 million represents enough money to run the county for almost eight months.

"That percentage is an indication of financial strength," said Alan Thompson, principal in the firm that performed the audit.

He was asked by County Council

members this week whether the increase in the surplus and in overall spending was normal.

"It's a very conservative position," Council Member Bob Anderson said.

The general fund surplus, or fund balance, has increased in each of the last five years. It was \$11.7 million in fiscal year 2020, which included the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

"Normal is hard to define," Thompson said.

Last year, County Council changed its budget policy to require a minimum fund balance of \$15 million in the general fund. It had been 35 percent of its annual expenses, but

no less than \$8 million. The current amount is 65.5 percent of expenses.

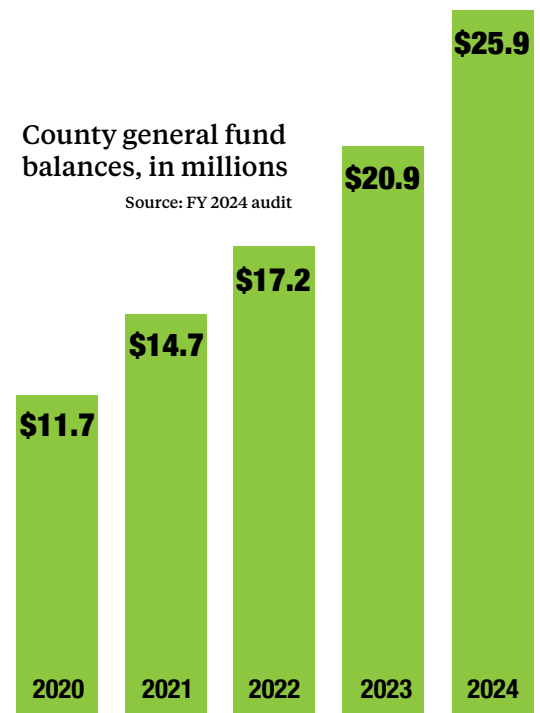
The goal was to have enough money on hand to deal with a major natural disaster or other emergency.

The fund balance growth for fiscal 2024 came from revenue that was above budget, including an additional \$1.5 million in property taxes, and expenses that were below, including \$1.2 million due to staff vacancies.

Property taxes account for 60 percent of the county's revenue and that increased 30 percent over the last five years, according to the audit.

"The growth, and a lot of it might SEE "SURPLUS," PAGE 3

County general fund balances, in millions
Source: FY 2024 audit



Charles Swenson/Coastal Observer

A car slid off Waverly Road near Waccamaw Elementary School the morning after last week's snow storm.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Winter wonderland comes with challenges

BY CHRIS SOKOLOSKI
COASTAL OBSERVER

Working in a coastal community, emergency management officials and first responders in Georgetown County know how to prepare for a hurricane.

But a snowstorm?

The preparations are basically the same according to Brandon Ellis, the county's emergency management director.

"We can take our core plan-

ning principles and implement them for any hazard we face, whether it's a hurricane, a winter storm like we had in this case, or a cyber incident like we had in 2021," Ellis said. "Or even a planned event like a bass tournament."

Last week's snowstorm created a lot of travel headaches, Ellis added, but the other factors that hurricanes bring, like power outages and evacuations, were not in play.

"The beauty of it was, we

were lucky it was just snow," he said. "Had it been an ice storm, we would have drastically different impacts because we would have had power outages and debris missions."

Safe traveling for his firefighters and paramedics was near the top of the worry list for Midway Fire Rescue Chief Brent McClellan.

"We didn't want them out in a snowstorm," McClellan said. "I didn't want them on the road during the height of the storm."

Crew members who were supposed to report to work on Jan. 22 were asked to come in on Jan. 21 before the snowfall got heavy.

Ellis said the city and county fire departments, and the sheriff's office, did the same thing.

Since none of Midway's fire trucks or ambulances is equipped with four-wheel drive, McClellan said he wanted as many pickup trucks as SEE "STORM," PAGE 3

TOURISM

New rules set for groups seeking funds to market events

BY CHRIS SOKOLOSKI
COASTAL OBSERVER

The second largest grant or of accommodations tax grants in Georgetown County is changing the way it handles requests.

The county's Tourism Management Commission decided last week to listen to recommendations from the Chamber of Commerce staff instead of listening to pitches from non-profits and other entities before making a decision.

Instead of hearing requests as they are submitted throughout the year, Chamber officials who provide staff support to the commission will set a date to hear all the requests and then make recommendations to the commission. The presentations will be open to the public as well as commission members.

Both Georgetown County and the city of Georgetown have accommodations tax advisory committees that operate in the same way when allocating money from the state's 2 percent tax on short-term rentals.

The Tourism Management Commission is responsible for the county's overall marketing and has money in its budget specifically to give to festivals and events for their marketing. The commission oversees the SEE "TOURISM," PAGE 4

MURRELLS INLET | Our Marsh Counts

Partners will use federal grant to cut plastic pollution in waterways

BY CHRIS SOKOLOSKI
COASTAL OBSERVER

Grant money from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is funding a project to educate people on keeping plastic pollution out of the Murrells Inlet watershed and reducing the amount of debris already there.

The project is called "Our Marsh Counts, A Watershed Approach to Marine Debris Reduction in South Carolina's Seafood Capital," and the \$275,692 grant is for three years.

"We're just really excited to have this opportunity," said Sandra Bundy of the Waccamaw Neck chapter of the Chirping Birds Society. "I'm from Murrells Inlet and I've been



Kelly Thorvalson hands out supplies at the first Our Marsh Count cleanup in 2022.

Charles Swenson/Coastal Observer

looking for a long time to find solutions."

Bundy is working with Kelly Thorvalson, senior manager of conservation programs for the South Carolina Aquarium and the investigator for the NOAA grant.

"There's more and more information coming out, almost every day, about how plastic pollution is harmful to us," said Thorvalson, a Georgetown native. "Finding the sources of harmful plastic pollution is critical to reducing it."

Among the other partners in the grant are Murrells Inlet 2020; the Georgetown County Parks, Recreation and Aging Services Department; Coastal Carolina University; the South Carolina Sea Grant Consortium; and the Gullah Geechee Chamber of Commerce.

Thorvalson said collaboration is "key" to increasing awareness of plastic pollution.

"We need the entire community to be involved just to be hyper aware of everything that's happening," she added.

"If we're not working together we're working against each other," Bundy said.

The aquarium created an app for "citizen scientists" to report litter during cleanups. SEE "INLET," PAGE 2

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For the birds: Festival brings people to town who want to flock together. **PAGE 4**



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