

District 6 school board vacancy sparks three-way race

BY CHRIS SOKOLOSKI
COASTAL OBSERVER

A retired educator and a former television newsman have joined an attorney in the race for the vacant District 6 seat on the Georgetown County School Board.

Jon Tester retired four years ago as Georgetown County’s assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction after 32 years in education as a



The candidates, from left, Alex Belser, Jarrod Ownbey and Jon Tester.

Charles Swenson/
Coastal Observer

teacher, principal and district administrator

“I feel like basically I’ve

done almost everything except transportation and food service,” Tester said. “I’ve been in-

involved and had my hand in almost every other aspect of the school district. I was fortunate because I was given opportunities to get involved and broaden my scope of experience.”

Alex Belser worked in television in Columbia, New Orleans, Texas and northeastern Pennsylvania.

“It’s nine people so everybody will have their opinion on the board,” Belser said. “I think I bring more of that reporting

and investigative background as far as questioning what’s going on. I’m not going to be intimidated because they say you have to cooperate with everybody because you’re on the school board.”

Jarrod Ownbey, a lawyer with the Mullins Law Firm in North Myrtle Beach, filed when the books opened April 25.

The husband of a teacher and the father of two students
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Photos by Charles Swenson/Coastal Observer



Everyone’s a winner

Terri Trianna, above, executive director of Birthright, gets the \$9,000 prize in a Plinko game that was part of the Palmetto Giving Day celebration in Georgetown. It was drawn for her by Addison Tamsberg, whose grandparents foundation funded the game. The annual, 36-hour fundraising event sponsored by the Frances P. Bunnelle Foundation had raised \$3.3 million, 85 percent of its goal, by midday Wednesday. At left, Janet Fricke, founder of Tidal Tales, got an extra \$3,500 from the Plinko game. Below, the Waccamaw High Band added a drum roll to the drama.



EDUCATION

Too many teachers? Board will take a look

BY CHRIS SOKOLOSKI
COASTAL OBSERVER

The proposed FY26 budget for the Georgetown County School District is approximately \$5.77 million.

However, principals and department heads have “wish lists” of items and additional staff that would cost another \$1.9 million.

Lisa Johnson, the district’s assistant superintendent for finance and technology, told the school board this week the pro-

posed budget includes a surplus of \$410,915, which means the board would have to come up with an additional \$1.52 million somewhere to fund everything on the wish lists.

Neither Johnson nor any board member spoke about a millage increase.

Included on the principals’ wish lists are another special area teacher at Waccamaw Elementary School, three new teachers and a guidance counselor at Carvers Bay High
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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Competing interests in mills fuel debate on city’s future

BY CHARLES SWENSON
COASTAL OBSERVER

The city of Georgetown issued a demolition permit this week for the steel mill that has anchored its waterfront since 1969. What will go up in its place depends on what happens on the site of the nearby International Paper Co. mill that closed last fall, said state Rep. Lee Hewitt.

“If you have smokestacks and smell and all that, it’s definitely going to impact what you do on the site,” he said.

The steel mill property is under contract to an unnamed buyer. Hewitt, whose district includes the site, has introduced him to local officials.

Those same officials, and staff from the state Department of Commerce, heard in January about a plan to convert the paper mill property into a power plant that would burn wood chips, a process known as biomass.

The buyer, also unidentified, proposes adding two boilers to the existing plant that



Charles Swenson/Coastal Observer

The steel mill overlooks the Georgetown waterfront.

powered the paper mill.

“The point is to generate electricity,” state Sen. Stephen Goldfinch said. “Santee Cooper needs more energy.”

The state owned utility plans to close its coal-burning Winyah Generating Station outside Georgetown once electricity from other sources comes online in the 2030s.

The buyer of the paper mill was also interested in the steel mill site, Goldfinch said.

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REGULATIONS | Flood maps and building codes

Lawmakers create an exemption that state agency had denied

BY CHARLES SWENSON
COASTAL OBSERVER

State legislators were poised this week to give Georgetown County a break from a flood regulation that a state agency was unwilling to grant.

Without a change to the state law, the county would have to enforce building standards for structures in some inland areas that previously ap-

plied only to structures on the oceanfront.

“LLR could fix this, but they refuse to do anything,” state Rep. Lee Hewitt said, referring to the state Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation.

State Sen. Stephen Goldfinch last week introduced a bill to grant the county an exemption. It received three readings and moved to the House, where Hewitt expected passage

this week.

“The standard that people have to overcome to overturn an agency decision is a high one,” Goldfinch said, one that he thinks is “arbitrary and capricious.”

The issue arose in 2023, when federal Flood Insurance Rate Maps for the county were updated for the first time since the 1980s. The new maps showed the “limit of moder-

ate wave action,” known as the LiMWA line, where wave heights of 1.5 to 3 feet could be expected. That line extends as much as 6 miles inland, taking in areas along the Pee Dee River and Wedgefield Plantation outside Georgetown.

Under an updated building code adopted by the state in 2021, structures east of the LiMWA line must be built to the standards required in the “V

zone” along the oceanfront.

The county asked the state Building Codes Council, part of LLR, to waive the requirement. Following a hearing at which the county’s chief building official, Steven Elliott, testified that the new code could make many existing structures nonconforming, and therefore unable to get insurance, the council denied the request.

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