

# COASTAL OBSERVER

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## District 6 candidates head to the finish line door by door



Charles Swenson/Coastal Observer

Bill Ringer, right, greets voters on the first day of early voting at the rec center.

BY CHARLES SWENSON  
COASTAL OBSERVER

In the digital age, candidates for Georgetown County Council District 6 are relying on the most analog of campaign tools.

"I've been going door to door with members of my team. That's basically what we're going to do the rest of the week," said Bill Ringer, who is challenging the incumbent in next week's GOP primary. "Every place we went, Stella had been." Council Member Stella Mercado had gone to 971 of an estimated 2,100 Republican-leaning

homes in the district by Tuesday, a week before the primary and a week after the start of early voting. She plans to visit a few hundred more in the time left in the campaign.

"It's very rewarding," Mercado said. "I've had people welcome me into their homes."

Although she has served one term on the council, she ran without opposition in 2022. Other than a couple of fundraisers ahead of the filing period, she didn't need to do any campaigning. Mercado said she has enjoyed the experience.

This is Ringer's first run  
**SEE "PRIMARY," PAGE 2**



Madison Sharrock/Coastal Observer

Stella Mercado, center, cuts the ribbon at the Stables Park dog run.

### ENVIRONMENT

## Threatened seabirds expand colony at park

BY MADISON SHARROCK  
COASTAL OBSERVER

The least tern colony at Huntington Beach State Park grew from 30 nests to 137 in a single year, surpassing Litchfield Beach as the second-largest colony in South Carolina.

The southern tip of Litchfield Beach saw 105 nests this year, down from last year's total of 113.

Mike Walker, interpretive ranger at the park, manages the colony that fills the area between the beach and salt creek near the south jetty at Murrells Inlet. It's the largest colony he has seen at the park.

He's seen colonies at the park before, averaging about 70 nests. One of the earliest he could recall was in 1989, the summer before Hurricane Hugo.

"It's been on and off for decades," he said. "Just the fact that we have so many chicks already, it's pretty amazing."

This is the second consecutive year that the seabirds have taken a liking to the area where sand was placed when the Army Corps of Engineers did maintenance dredging of the navigation channel between the jetties.

It's now a newly-created habitat, said Felicia Sanders, who heads the Coastal Bird Project with S.C. Department of Natural Resources.

She said she's glad to see colonies persist despite the bird's threatened status.

"It's phenomenal. To see so many birds there, it's just exciting," Sanders said. "The fact they came back, that's a good



Photos by Madison Sharrock/Coastal Observer

sign that they probably had success last year."

The state's largest least tern colony is at Bird Key-Stono Seabird Sanctuary south of Charleston. It's managed by DNR and closes from March 15 to Oct. 15 to protect nesting birds.

There are approximately 1,000 least tern nests across the entire state, Sanders added.

Least terns, a highly territorial species of seabird, favor flat, bare areas. Low vegetation is key in order for the terns to spot predators from long distances.

When the least terns sense danger, the adults soar above the area to alert the others, which triggers a group effort to attack predators.

Walker said the least terns got a head start this year and  
**SEE "TERNS," PAGE 7**



A least tern flies over a fence that protects the colony from predators. At left, a decoy and speaker for bird calls help attract the least terns.

### PAWLEYS ISLAND

## With historic preservation ordinance comes pause

BY CHARLES SWENSON  
COASTAL OBSERVER

Two words that have long defined Pawleys Island are about to be enshrined in local law. It's part of an effort to preserve the island's historic homes.

A historic preservation ordinance approved by a special committee this week says it will give protection to "structures representing the distinctive Pawleys Island aesthetic often known as 'arrogantly shabby.'" Moving the popular phrase from bumper stickers and T-shirts to an ordinance is part of the town's effort to reduce the number of old homes that are torn down because renovation costs trigger compliance with federal flood regulations.

"Part of this is trying to preserve these older houses, but also make them livable," said Bert Mills, a member of the Planning Commission and the special committee created by Town Council this year to lead the historic preservation effort.

After adopting architectural guidelines in 2021 to preserve the "Pawleys look" for new houses, the town started looking for ways to protect the old ones. Ten homes were included in a historic district added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1972, but their status doesn't protect them from alteration or demolition.

The Planning Commission  
**SEE "PAWLEYS," PAGE 2**

### EDUCATION | The school budget

## As district prepares to cut teachers, tax increase stays in plan

BY MADISON SHARROCK  
COASTAL OBSERVER

Board Member Jarrod Ownbey said the price is right as the Georgetown County School Board discussed the second draft of a proposed operating budget for the district's next fiscal year that begins July 1.

"We should be doing more, so this is not too much of a price to ask for what we need to give to our students so they can provide back to the community when they get older," Ownbey said. "If you invest in your kids, you invest in schools, you



Scott DuBose

invest in the community. You're going to see your return on that."

Board Member Scott DuBose said he's not optimistic about the proposed budget. He supports raising the pay for teachers and other staff, but said he's struggling with the idea of raising taxes "to find" \$1.5 million to do it rather than cutting it from ex-

penditures.

"It has been said on this board that we're willing to make difficult decisions. In my opinion, raising taxes is not difficult. It's really easy," he said. "What's actually difficult is finding ways to cut expenses in order to balance the budget."

The board is considering a 3.1-mill tax increase even as it is planning to cut 19 teaching and five administrative positions.

The first draft showed a 3-mill increase, raising the tax rate from 121 to 124 mills. That would generate an additional \$1.5 million.

The second draft proposed this week showed the tax rate changing from 120 to 123.1 mills. The tax rate approved by the board last year was 120 mills. The additional tenth of a mill is worth \$50,000.

"I can live with this," said Chairman Keith Moore, who favors increasing the tax rate.

The state's cap on the district's tax rate is 3.2 mills this year. The district also has "look back millage" available from years when it raised taxes by less than the state limit. There are 13.4 mills available.

"What we're seeing right

now is a direct result of the failure in the past to keep up with what needed to happen. This body failed to increase, in an incremental way, to keep up with the cost and the increase in cost," Ownbey said. "At some point the bill comes due."

"We had to live within our means of that, but it didn't move us forward," said Board Member Patti Hammel.

A 3.1-mill increase would add \$18.60 to the tax bill for every \$100,000 in value of commercial property and second homes. There is no property tax  
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