

Push to preserve is alive and well

Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson
The Citistates Group
Tuesday, September 11, 2007

Sit around a table with the skilled citizen negotiators of the Lowcountry Land Trust. Or check in with their allies — the Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, the Coastal Conservation League and others. Or spend an hour with Coy Johnston, former timber executive and leader of Ducks Unlimited and veteran of one land conservation fight after another over the past 30 years.

These are smart, and in many cases well-heeled, folks. Their heart's fully in the fight. And while monied people may be involved, Johnston, whose auto bumper sticker reads: "Hunters Against Sprawl," argues conservation is a true people's cause.

But is there any "master plan" in all of this? Not if one looks to the region's governments. Most often, they appear to have had little clue about the conservation import of lands or what checks on development they really should impose to protect the sensitive Lowcountry of creeks, lowlands and waters and their exquisite views.

But ask the Coastal Conservation League's Dana Beach if there's a regional plan and you get a strong "yes." His maps show actual or hoped-for protected landscapes, either parks or conservation easements, on the south, southwest and northeast of the Charleston area's population-growth centers. In Charleston County, there's now the added protection of zoning. The conservationists hope that Dorchester County, in particular, will continue adding urban-service boundaries. The intended result, without any government ever planning it, is to be a true a greenbelt for the tri-county region.

Not only did that story surprise us; we even heard questioning of what seemed the universally acclaimed MeadWestvaco development of 70,000 acres along the Edisto River.

Not a good plan at all, said Hugh Lane Jr., a leading Charleston banker and community leader. It would be better to raise the \$1 billion plus needed to buy the land for perpetual conservation, Lane said. He even offered a financial rationale: It costs Dorchester County roughly \$28,000 in infrastructure costs for each new home; if MeadWestvaco puts up 40,000, public costs of \$1.1 billion would be incurred anyway.

We're not sure we agree with Lane on this issue, especially since MeadWestvaco seems to be forging a new and welcome form of development, staged over decades, intended to be fully respectful of the region's wondrous natural setting and history. But what the region desperately needs is more Hugh Lanes, conservationists willing to raise issues, engage debate and fight with their hearts for the Lowcountry they love.

Standing tradition on its head

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It said a lot, but perhaps shouldn't have been a huge surprise, when the prestigious Urban Land Institute last spring recognized Charleston's Daniel Island project as one of 11 nationally leading examples of imaginative real estate development.

"In 10 years," the institute said, "the 4,000-acre Daniel Island has been transformed from a private hunting retreat into a community of 6,000 residences that has become a natural extension of the city of Charleston."

The institute also noted that Daniel Island had achieved a mix of incomes among its tenants, in a walkable, human-scale mix of homes and offices. The project, Mayor Joe Riley said, had wisely avoided the obvious solution of the times: to become "a gated resort."

Visiting Daniel Island, we noted some other ingenious community-making touches. Schools are within walking distance of homes. The largest housing for lower-income residents is right in the middle of the town center — and in the middle of the job opportunities. And right beside a day-care center is a residence for senior citizens, a clever way to encourage volunteerism.

The Daniel Island planners were fortunate to be operating on fresh territory. Vince Graham and his associates, planning the I'On development in Mount Pleasant in the same period, faced a huge struggle to construct a town of cheek-by-jowl houses, apartments and business sites. Opponents from nearby subdivisions said the "wrong people" would be attracted, that heavy traffic would be generated, the roundabout traffic circle planned would be a deadly addition.

Multifamily housing units got stripped out during the permitting process. Lawsuits flew left and right. Several Mount Pleasant Town Council members who supported the project lost their seats.

But today, celebrating its 10th anniversary, I'On is a stunning success — economically (housing values up very sharply), socially (a real neighborhood), and as a symbol of the Charleston area advancing, or better said, returning, to the great city culture for which it was historically known. A chief criticism could be it's too successful: At 80 percent build-out of its zoned 762 homes, the resale value of houses is averaging \$1.6 million.

Indeed, say supporters, the next challenge is to make I'Ons or Daniel Islands permissible everywhere there's market demand. That's increasingly the case in Charleston. But zoning codes across all three counties, it's argued, should make these more-compact developments just as "legal" as standard subdivisions and commercial strips. Then, prices might start to drop appreciably.

It is worth noting that other dense-use developments are now rolling forward. One is the Mixson development in North Charleston, another Magnolia on the Ashley River in Charleston. And last spring the same Mount Pleasant Town Council that hit a political minefield in approving I'On was able to approve the new Central Mount Pleasant development on a 5-2 vote.

It will have 719 residences, most concentrated in a 35-acre mixed-use tract including office and retail space. The design plan, by Charleston's Keane and Co., also includes a 200-room hotel and new location for an elementary school.

A powerful wave of growth: Trying to balance growth, conservation

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In a Summerville school, several dozen Dorchester County citizens gather to tell us their concerns and hopes about the big growth debate that's engulfed the Charleston region. A gentleman rises, identifies himself as a retired veteran and notes he's lived in Summerville for 76 years. Then, with a sweep of his hand, he says: "I can tell you what the problem is. It's all you people."

The audience chuckles — they know he's right. They're part of a population tide that's carried Dorchester County from 22,600 people in 1950 to 118,979 in 2006, Berkeley County from 30,250 to 152,282 and Charleston County from 164,850 to 331,917 in the same time span.

Even now, the region is adding some 9,000 people a year. Summerville, which this man recalls had no certified bank and only two Realtors in the 1960s, is the center of one of the fastest-growing counties in the United States.

For lots of people, the growth wave spells new economic opportunity. But it carries downsides, too. Over several months, conducting some 200 interviews across the three counties to prepare this series for The Post and Courier, we were exposed to a cascade of worries and concerns about the velocity of growth right now. Here are samples of what we heard:

New residential subdivisions — especially in Dorchester and Berkeley counties — seem to be popping up willy-

nilly, sometimes without adequate provision for roads or schools or even timely connection of water and sewer service. Why can't there be an ordered plan for development?

Automobile traffic is increasing so fast, along with rising numbers of trucks, that daily commutes and errands become stop-and-go congestion that translates into seriously diminished time to spend with children and families, for recreation, for sleep.

There are locations, especially in Dorchester County with its rapid-fire growth, that have some of America's seriously overcrowded schools. And the state government doesn't even let schools (or municipalities, for that matter) impose impact fees on new developments as they are rolled out.

There's fear that the Lowcountry's magical landscapes — the lure that drew many people to the region — will give way to the bulldozer for the next swath of development.

Mindlessly anti-growth?

Do these concerns mean the citizens are becoming irrationally anti-growth? We didn't find that. South Carolina's reverence for market choices and the job-generating fruits of free enterprise is still alive and well. But people do want to know more about what kind of development is coming at them, and when.

And they want the process opened up. Justified or not, there's suspicion, especially in Dorchester and Berkeley counties and Charleston County outside the city proper, that officials are making quiet, quick deals

with developers, behind city or county council doors. We found citizens made it abundantly clear they resented being kept in the dark, that they want to be informed about, and be able to influence, growth decisions impacting their communities and their lives.

A significant number of people ask a different, tough question: Why are so many apparently disjointed, piecemeal decisions about local and regional growth being made? Isn't it high time to develop a vision — by city and county to be sure, but also regionwide — that makes it clear where growth should be encouraged, and conversely, areas where it's not appropriate or not yet timely? Where, they wondered, is the leadership to pull us together, to ensure a livable future?

Old Charleston: too well loved?

There's an irony about all this. Across most of America, the Charleston area is rarely regarded as a scene of hot growth and development pressures. To the contrary: Ask people from "off" about this region, and they tend to draw in their breaths and focus exclusively on the area at the tip of the peninsula. They talk of the town as a precious and wondrous old vase, to be handled with great care.

There's no argument: The fame of old Charleston is well deserved. Few other towns can even begin to rival the city's rich architecture, distinctive arts, and the deep history of many different cultures on this continent. Old Charlestonians told us of their immense relief at the city's dramatic recovery from the near-century of genteel decline it suffered from the Civil War into the 1970s. Who'd have ever thought it would become one of America's best restaurant and shopping towns?

If anything, Charleston is too well loved these days. Many of its historic homes are so exquisite that rich outsiders buy them as a second, third or fourth home. Often the new owners visit only occasionally, with the result that old, once cohesive peninsula

neighborhoods seem a bit deserted. A major problem is that many longtime lower-income residents, especially

African-Americans, are finding themselves priced out of the city and forced to seek out less-expensive housing,

especially in North Charleston. The city government is trying hard with a

variety of housing assistance

initiatives, but the tide of affluence is tough to fight.

Long a poor cousin, North Charleston is seeing strong investment in its airport-convention center axis and now ranks as a top South Carolina retailing site. In a seeming historic wink of an eye, Mount Pleasant has progressed from a single old village to a massive corridor of suburban housing. West Ashley, James Island and Johns Island have populations far beyond peoples' imagination a few decades ago. Now most significant residential growth pressures are focused on Dorchester and Berkeley counties, even while most jobs remain anchored south of Interstate 526.

New bridge, new region

Like many visitors, we were transfixed by the spires and dramatic sweep of the new Ravenel Bridge. To us, it suggests the dynamic, intimately interconnected metropolitan region this has become, now more than 600,000 people strong.

And let there be no doubt: This region is one functional unit. For proof, just note how area residents, oblivious to the political boundaries, go county to county, town to town each day for work, shopping, entertainment and higher education. Many residents live in one county, work in another and have family in yet a third. A stunning 70 percent of Dorchester County's employed people commute out of the county for

work daily, most heavily to North Charleston.

The region's new era is symbolized by new ventures and enterprises recruited by the highly effective Charleston Regional Development Alliance, advocacy by the Charleston Metro Chamber of Commerce (It was given a "five star" rating by the U.S. Chamber), plus the tide of workers, retirees and second-home buyers pouring in. Yet there's still a wondrous "old" to be protected — the treasure of the historic city and plantations and gardens, the lovely sea islands, the wondrous forests and wetlands that draw hunters and naturalists from afar.

And there's no question the region's shift — from a quiet and once-depressed community on the sea to a fast-growing American metropolis — has had its rough spots. Rather than act in concert, the region's politicians have often championed their individual jurisdictions alone, engaging in annexation wars, complete with fiery rhetoric and lawsuits, to seize tax-productive territory. A recent example: the fight over the Watson Hill development, with three governmental entities, two landowners, the Coastal Conservation League and a slew of lawyers all suing each other.

And then there's the issue of water and sewer service. From Johns Island to Hollywood, Awendaw to Carolina Bay, there have been major struggles over where and when they should be extended: Without these utilities, in this watery Lowcountry, development gets stopped in its tracks.

Hopeful signs?

OK, is there any light at the end of the tunnel on the complex growth issue?

One wouldn't want to overpromise. But in taking the temperature on hot growth issues in major U.S. metro regions, we believe we've developed some sensitivity to potential breakthrough moments: occasions when people are so tired of chronic discord and its consequences that they're open to new ideas. We think, maybe, Charleston is there. Our talks with people from a mix of sectors — government, business, civic, environmental groups — suggest so.

Here's what we heard:

The "D" word — density — is losing some of its terror. The change isn't universal, but from politicians to developers to citizens, we heard increased openness to compact, mixed-use, traditional neighborhood forms of development. Take your choice of a reason: The standard spread suburban model might seem less attractive if it means sitting in traffic for hours along clogged roadways. Once built, people quickly warm up to the old-American neighborhood feel of closely built developments like I'On in Mount Pleasant, fought bitterly by some neighbors when it was first proposed a decade ago, now widely admired. The idea of parks and shops within walking distance is gaining popularity in this time of \$3-a-gallon gas and media attention to how our vehicles and sprawling development contribute to global warming.

Is commuter rail one solution? Talk about the region's future and surprising numbers of people say its time should be now. The focus of interest is in commuter-rail service, especially the proposed Summerville-North Charleston-downtown Charleston line.

Smarter neighborhood plans? On Johns Island last spring we watched Charleston Councilwoman Anne Frances Bleeker preside over citizen planning sessions with a nationally renowned traffic engineer and neighborhood planner Walter Kulash as he suggested a break from standard suburban development with its cul de sacs and clogged roads.

The citizens liked Kulash's ideas, and the city-developed plan now reflects it. As the incorporated section of Johns Island grows, there's to be a web of smaller roadways, perhaps even new live oak canopies. One goal is to disperse traffic and thus prevent Maybank Highway from becoming a roaring, multilane highway.

By avoiding the typical subdivision pattern of a single exit, more destinations will be easily accessed by foot or bike, or shorter car rides. In place of drive-only development spread along Maybank, three mini-

downtowns will be positioned on the roadway, each easy to walk or bike around. And there'll be specific provisions for affordable housing.

Johns Island, in short, is finding a way to invite citizens and an imaginative city planning department, not developers alone, to set the rules.

The plan doesn't settle the "alligator in the bathtub" problem — whether the Mark Clark Expressway needs to, or should be extended to the island. It leaves open the issue of saving rural stretches of the island from a development push as exclusive new communities displace farmers and black residents, some of whose families have been there since the Civil War and earlier.

Still, it's a powerful new development model.

Land conservation moves forward. There were some sighs of frustration last spring when the first round of greenbelt purchases, financed under the half-cent sales tax voters approved in 2004, covered far fewer of the rural land tracts than supporters had hoped.

But, say many conservationists: Don't be pessimistic or defeatist; check out the remarkable ring of protected green space that has been created around much of the Charleston region in the last generation. From the massive Ace Basin land-protection push of the 1980s, and then the Francis Marion National Forest, the conservation effort has been incessant, including recent transactions in the Ashley River Plantation District and on the sea islands. The cumulative result is a remarkable protective belt of distinctive Lowcountry territory that can't be gobbled up for growth — a land-protection effort, largely led by private citizens and groups like the Lowcountry Land Trust, that few other regions of America even come close to emulating.

Many Charlestonians shudder at the potential impact of the 135,000 already approved home sites pinpointed in Post and Courier surveys. But Dana Beach of the Coastal Conservation League said most of the sites are in West Ashley or north of I-526 — not in the region's more "charismatic," sea-oriented tracts of land.

Timber company conservation. There's no more frightening prospect for Charlestonians than timber companies selling off huge chunks of their land, often far from urban centers, to developers who'll clear-cut lots, throw up standard subdivisions, and trigger huge new floods of long-distance commuters onto the region's already overtaxed roads.

So there were lots of cheers in May when MeadWestvaco announced it would initiate a "conservation-inspired master plan with a public input process" for a massive (112-square mile) Edisto River site it holds in Charleston and Dorchester counties. The company is showing strong interest in a series of compact towns or villages surrounded by large, still-undeveloped lands.

Project president Kenneth Seeger explains that each will have its own downtown commercial retail center "where people can walk for their coffee or newspaper." There will be significant office and work opportunities for residents. "We expect to mitigate our impacts and pay our fair share to schools," Seeger says. The Lowcountry character is to be maintained — protections for such historic and natural areas as historic cemeteries and live oak clusters.

If MeadWestvaco succeeds in setting a new standard of timber company sensitivity to environmental and growth issues, there's at least a chance the South Carolina culture of free-enterprise development can coexist with compelling needs to develop with caution, preserving the environment at every step. Property rights can be respected, but dialogue, a voice for the public, can replace sudden, secret deals, to virtually everyone's benefit.

The Neck's urban opportunity. We found it difficult not to be astounded by the Manhattan Island size, and incredible opportunity, of the region's much- and long-neglected stretch of territory called the Charleston Neck. It's the territory stretching from the upper sections of Charleston to Park Circle in North Charleston, literally the center of the three county-region.

The Neck is not just the gateway to the historic but also home to the Port of Charleston, a tangle of roadways and rail lines, site of many historic black communities, and the target of multiple exciting development projects. It's now the subject of a wave of fresh attention, public and private. Indeed, the Neck's issues are so central to the region's 21st century fate that we'll devote an entire Sunday of this series to examining them.

State government helping? It said a lot when South Carolina's Republican, libertarian governor, Mark Sanford, called a big land-use conference in March in Charleston, warning that the metro region could be spreading 18 miles west of Summerville by 2030 unless restraints are placed on rampant residential development.

Sanford gave a platform to the famed "New Urbanist" planner-visionary Andres Duany, one of I'On's designers. Duany told South Carolinians they're "ruining" their state with fast-spreading, suburban strip development and spread out, land-consuming new subdivisions that trigger unbearable levels of road congestion.

The legislature is starting to hear the message. In May, it passed a Priority Investment Act that might add a strong dose of sanity to localities' development processes.

Cities and counties, for the first time, will be obliged to identify where the money's coming from for the added water and sewer lines, improved roads and new schools necessary to accommodate growth — and to develop a 10-year priority plan for such projects. They'll also have to update their comprehensive plans so they not only spell out new roads, but potential for transit, pedestrian and bicycle-related projects.

None of this forces what's called concurrency — legally denying new residential subdivisions until the roads and schools to accommodate them are in place, or on a track to completion. But throwing sunlight on the process enables robust public debate, and might make a real difference.

Cross-border planning

Is the closely interwoven Charleston region also ready to apply "talk-before-you-act" principles across its maze of political boundaries? The idea ought to make imminent sense: If traffic snarls are to be minimized, the environment and existing communities protected, then reckless unilateral action by any one government (as in the annexation wars) is a very bad idea.

Again, the new Priority Investment Act helps a little by urging cities and counties to consult with one another before they act. They're even encouraged to talk to the school districts that so often make school location decisions — such as mega-schools on the urban fringe — that defy principles of sound community growth. Virtually nothing in South Carolina law ever before pointed to such coordination.

Historic moves toward a unified regional approach are getting under way under the aegis of the Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Council of Governments. It's not clear how specific a regional land-use plan might emerge. But Charleston Mayor Joe Riley is the COG's current chairman and has appointed a land-use committee under Dorchester County Council Chairman Larry Hargett; Hargett appears in line to succeed Riley as COG chairman in two years. Both say they're committed to broadened collaboration.

North Charleston Mayor Keith Summey also says he's ready to move forward on joint planning and "smart growth" development. Berkeley County's new Supervisor, Dan Davis, told us he has a strong interest in both countywide and regional planning.

Results from these new approaches are far from guaranteed. Some tough fights surely lie ahead. But we finished our interviews convinced there's a window of opportunity now to tame and reshape the Charleston region's pell-mell growth.

The region can welcome newcomers and enjoy economic growth while preserving its distinctive historic settlement and wondrous Lowcountry natural setting. But it can do it only with new sets of development

incentives and rules, and working as one unified region, not a collection of warring local cities and counties.

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