

A Lowcountry Valentine (And the glass half-empty)

Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson
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We've focused for the past four Sundays on an array of hard Charleston-area challenges — growth and its dilemmas, transportation, development of the 'New Neck,' the imperative of more unified regional leadership.

Today, as a windup, we'd like to change pace.

First, we'll toss a valentine to this absolutely unique, wondrous spot on the American continent.

And second, we'll take a look at several challenges, and promising people-to-people Lowcountry initiatives to match, that cropped up in our interviews.

The valentine's not hard to design. In a continent of mass culture, this place is wonderfully distinctive. A walk along the Battery, through the streets of the preserved homes and churches of the lower peninsula, is a rare treat for today's Americans, indeed a draw for growing numbers of foreign tourists, too. As well as reminders that freedom of religion has deep historic roots here: We still recall, on a first visit to Charleston in 1969, then-Mayor J. Palmer Gaillard Jr. focusing on that point, especially showing us the 1749-founded Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim synagogue.

And then there's your distinctive landscape of complex waterways, tawny marshes, great live oaks and hanging Spanish moss. Stirring Sea Island vistas. Or stepping into a place like the Audubon Society's Francis Beidler Forest in the Four Holes Swamp area of

Dorchester County, you find yourself in the largest virgin blackwater cypress forest left in the world. There are 1,000-year-old trees and broad varieties of wildlife including some of America's rarest songbirds.

There's 'a huge conservation ethic here,' notes Noisette developer John Knott. He cites on the one hand hunting, fishing, appreciation of the land and ecosystem, and on the other Charleston as 'the mother of historic preservation in America.' Those two ethics, Knott suggests, 'are the heart and soul of sustainability' — the critical challenge of a perilous 21st century.

Add to all that Spoleto, a fine local symphony, the amazing national retail draw of King Street and burgeoning distinctive restaurants. It all adds up to just the kind of environment that a youthful entrepreneur such as Jeff Grady would select to develop his fabulously successful startup company (Digital Lifestyle Outfitters). From a 2002 Charleston startup, it now leads the world in designing and making cases and accessories for iPods. Virtually by osmosis, Grady suggests, his employees can soak up the latest standards in colors, style, how things are packaged, just by walking by King Street retail stores.

What a collection of advantages! Lucky you, modern-day Charlestonians!

But a glass half-empty

Beyond its built and natural environment, how does this region care for its people? How connected are they to one another, or to this place? In terms of mutual support, so everybody has a fair shot, and all can prosper together, how's the region doing?

On those questions, we heard an earful of critiques. Here's a sampling:

'History is both blessing and curse — it gives us tradition, but it also keeps us stuck.' 'We have unbelievable balkanization of services, lots of police chiefs, nothing organized regionally.' 'We're an area of downshifters, people who come for the climate, with their wealth, but sometimes contribute little here.'

Civic failings were at the root of some criticisms: 'People don't seem to care what you do as long as you don't bother them.' 'We're afflicted by raging politeness — people don't like to talk about difficult issues, they cover them up under a veneer of politeness.'

Sometimes the shortcomings get identified more easily by people from 'off' who bring perspective with them. Jeremy Browning, Habitat's Charleston area director, cites a thin layer of housing nonprofits or neighborhood advocacy groups in the region, and much less local advocacy than he's been accustomed to in his earlier work in Chicago. Or as former Charleston County Schools Superintendent Maria Goodloe-Johnson said in her farewell interview with *The Post and Courier* in June, the Charleston area still retains 'a plantation mentality,' reflected in complacency as people 'sit back and allow things to happen to them — and that's slavery.'

Others worry about the loss of what's special here: 'There's a big-box, high-volume mentality that permeates everything these days,' some conservationists complained. Plus notions about security: 'gated communities, the demonstrably false but popular thought that if we fortify, we'll be safer.'

So what kinds of initiatives can make up for weaknesses, and enrich the region's civic soil? We asked, listened, for clues. Many of the most promising ideas we heard seem based in enriched people-to-people connections, ties within communities and across the region's many political and social boundaries. Here's a sampling of what we heard:

Neighborhoods first

Organized, strong neighborhoods, where residents first get to know each other, and then plan and protest and do projects together, are the sure foundation of a resilient region. The Charleston area has strong local governments, but to our outsiders' eyes it seems to lag on the neighborhood side. And there's a price to be paid: To a large extent neighborhoods are where children's development and socialization occurs, where community ties are made, where adequate housing is provided — or not. Neighborhoods are where crime is addressed — or left to fester. They either encourage lots of walking, with welcoming sidewalks, paths and parks — or they succumb to the roadways-only, auto-dominant culture that experts say is fattening and softening our entire culture.

From the Sea Islands

to Moncks Corner and Summerville, today's Charleston region would do well to put as much attention, as many resources, into neighborhoods as it does to land preservation.

That means bringing neighbors together on key planning decisions. As one civic leader reminded us: 'It's government that's saying big retail boxes are the answer, that neighborhood stores are dispensable.' Giving in to the highway lobby, subdivision developers and commercial demand for easy road access to money-making big stores, the region has developed a surplus of fast and sometimes forbidding major traffic roadways — among them Johnnie Dodds Boulevard, Savannah Highway and Dorchester Road. But it is lacking, outside of the Old City and a few choice spots like historic center Summerville, an ample supply of people-scaled, welcoming streets. Ask neighbors, and it's more human-scale streets they want.

But our times are producing other priorities. A top example: affordable housing for teachers, police officers, employees of hotels and restaurants — indeed all people of modest means.

Schools and neighborhoods

Lagging performance scores. South Carolina's last-in-the-nation rating on ninth-graders actually making it through high school. Some school districts, Dorchester in particular, are

drowning in rapid growth and struggling for teachers, school sites, and especially money to pay for it all. Bitter despair in many of Charleston's inner-city schools. Few charter schools to provide true choice for families. And the reputation of schools driving where people live, even if they end up with (pardon the vernacular) really hairy daily commutes.

All those school problems and more came tumbling out in our interviews across the three counties. It seems clear to us: The county governments should have control of the schools, starting with their locations, to coordinate growth with the counties' comprehensive plans and directions. Then, as we've recommended in our earlier articles, let the counties coordinate on where growth should be encouraged and concentrated, and where it's so distant from existing facilities (schools included) or so imperiling to natural features, that it shouldn't be allowed.

The neighborhood tie is critical to school success. Too many school board elections, we heard, are so focused on cost, or on teaching issues, that they skip the critical issue of where schools are kept open and where new ones are located. At the high school level, Gov. Mark Sanford has had it right in his campaign to curb the building of mega-schools with thousands of students (like the Wando High School on the outskirts of Mount Pleasant). Not only do big outlying schools make it possible for some kids to turn off and virtually disappear in the crowd, becoming prime dropout candidates, they also clog the highways, forcing most kids to ride the big yellow buses or teenagers to drive to school, rather than engage in the healthy walks and bike rides of earlier generations.

Imagine what a smart Dorchester County or Berkeley County might do: Zone to create a full town around one of its new elementary-middle or high schools. It would mean homes, shops, school, walking, biking and connectivity in one place. If a crescendo of growth is headed their way, why not put the elements together for a viable and efficient community?

More broadly, how about full community involvement in schools across the region? It's a lot easier with smaller, more intimate school settings — and it's even a way, North Charleston Mayor Keith Summey suggests, to tame crime rates. Both Summey and Charleston's Mayor Joe Riley are interested in re-engaging public involvement in critical ways.

Terry Peterson, an education consultant with the College of Charleston, spelled out for us a variety of ways to integrate schools fully into their communities, with benefits for all citizens, plus exciting ideas for shared tri-county

school initiatives with new opportunities related to Charleston's place in the 21st-century world.

Learning to act as an effective, unified region could, in fact, prove contagious. Let's note just two more opportunities — in the Gullah culture, and distinctive Lowcountry food and farming.

African-American predicament

The African-American story is part of Charleston's very bones. The port was America's Ellis Island for Africans — by various sources, 40 percent to 60 percent of all brought to these shores in slavery came from Charleston Harbor. The black community provided the essential labor pool of the plantation economy that literally 'made' early South Carolina. And yet through the brunt of cruel oppression, slaves and later freedmen were also the source of the artisan talents, from carpentry to blacksmithing, that built the historic and still globally admired city. And not just old Charleston; as we sat talking with Rep. James Clyburn in the U.S. Capitol in Washington, he reminded us: 'The hands that built this building were the hands of slaves.'

Does race still play a huge role in the Charleston region's life and politics? The universal answer we encountered: yes. It was even the reason, some told us, that World War II Charleston leaders decided to annex west into Ashley rather than north on the Neck, to avoid becoming a heavily black city. And race,

many believe, propels deep divisions and inequities in the public school system. A mild-mannered black academic shocked us by saying, 'The school system here was deliberately wrecked to stop African-American kids from getting an education.'

What's the broad outlook for the African-Americans of Greater Charleston in this century? It's possible to write a grim scenario. The Navy Base and shipyard closings robbed blacks of many middle-class incomes. Few new low- or semi-skilled jobs are opening. Ranks of the region's black middle to upper class seem extraordinarily thin — even though those who are present, gathered in such organizations as '100 Men of Charleston,' work hard to make an impact.

The region has no black college or university, with all the networking and new economic opportunities that such institutions bring to other lead Southern cities. South Carolina State is minimally involved with Charleston. The most talented black youths might see little reason to stay, might be tempted to try the Charlottes and Atlantas for their careers.

Historic poverty still blights opportunity in many black neighborhoods. Crime rates in Charleston and North Charleston, largely black-on-black incidents, are alarmingly high. And there's fear that historic black community supports are weakening. We heard an outpouring of grief over the white establishment's prevailing disinterest at a meeting of black citizens and leaders organized for us by the Rev. Alma Dungee of the North Central Charleston Neighborhood Organization. But the same group expressed equal worries about the weakening that participants reported in black institutions — especially black churches, long a foundation of community stability, and the black family.

'Today's parents — the 30- to 35-year age group — are the first raised without the discipline and structure of the historic black family,' one leader said. 'Many churches have youth, anti-drug, pro-education and health initiatives — but they're experiencing a decline in membership,' Dungee said, adding, 'We must go back to compassion and love and some of the old discipline.'

Common sense says the entire region, whites included, has a huge stake in the black population's success. The local economy will drift without a qualified, well-educated work force. Poverty and crime drag down an entire region; the average incarceration, one local business leader noted, costs \$2 million over a lifetime. And black economic success, including opportunities for a growing black middle class, benefits everyone.

We cringed when Keith Waring, the African-American who recently headed the Charleston Chamber of Commerce, said he believed 'race has a lot to do' with public foot-dragging in support of public transit. And then he moved on to de facto business discrimination. All the local appraisers, he said, are white; they routinely come into the minority community and set values at less than it would cost to build, making bank financing impossible. Even worse, said Waring, local banks have effectively choked off the flow of development loan credit in the \$500,000-\$2 million bracket, where black startup companies' needs are concentrated. He said the banks claim that loans in that bracket have the highest loss ratios. Waring replies: 'Whatever losses you have in development loans in that category is not occurring in the black community, because you're not doing any.'

The region has, to be sure, some strong and colorful African-American social spokesmen — and not just those in elected office. Among those we met were Pastor Joseph A. Darby Jr. of Morris Brown AME Church and Bill Saunders, leader of the north-Charleston-based COBRA (Committee on Better Racial Assurance), organized after the famed Charleston hospital strike, the key local event of the 1960s civil rights revolution. Both men are ferocious defenders of their community.

But the tales they tell are also sad: Saunders, driving us through Charleston, across James and Johns islands, bemoaned first the dramatic loss of black businesses as gentrification impacts the city. Then he cited the waves of real estate development imperiling black property ownership and a rich black community culture on the islands, where he'd had his own roots as a boy. 'Black people are allowed to keep land until white people are ready — then they come and get it,' Saunders said.

The region has historically enjoyed levels of black land ownership unmatched anywhere else in the United States — in part, we heard, because mosquitoes and other insects were so prevalent that whites, in the post-

plantation era, had less interest in coastal properties. But the lands acquired in the post-Civil War years have become hard to hold in the face of speculative pressures and the very informal nature of families handing down land, generation to generation, without clear titles. A Center for Heirs' Property Preservation, supported by the Coastal Community Foundation and the Ford Foundation, has been working on legal tools to help landowners preserve their rights to the property they live on, and not be obliged to sell out when just one descendant — often living far away — discovers he has a technical share of the property and wants to cash in.

But it's a tough battle, as Richard Habersham, president of the Phillips Community Association, active on a piece of unincorporated land surrounded by Mount Pleasant, relates. His ancestor bought the family's 10-acre piece of land for a then-significant \$63 in 1878. 'Grandfather had a mill and we tended the land for generations.' But now the land is assessed at \$950,000 and it's been tough getting the heirs to agree on a settlement that doesn't lose the entire parcel. Why the pressure? Local real estate speculation serving affluent retiree populations, and driving up taxes: 'We're surrounded by exclusive golf-type communities — literally gated communities.'

Gullah cultural opportunity

We kept asking: Where's the sliver of hope for today's Charleston area black community? And we believe it's clear: in a new wave of pride in the region's Gullah-Geechee tradition.

Much of this is already in motion. National respect and interest in the Gullah language, artistry, music and contribution to early America has risen sharply in the past decade. Last year, Congress passed Clyburn's bill creating the Gullah-Geechee Heritage Corridor and providing \$10 million to support it. Plans are still proceeding to build an International African-American Museum in Charleston — a city where outright discussion of slavery was discreetly suppressed for a century after 'the Recent Unpleasantness.'

There's been a dramatic turn in language and programs at such nationally known places as Middleton Plantation, Magnolia Plantation, Drayton Hall, and Boone Hall Plantation. The curators there have abandoned earlier years' euphemisms, such as 'servant quarters.' Now they fully acknowledge the base of human slavery on which the plantations depended. A lead agent in effecting the change has been Marvin Dulaney, College of Charleston historian and director of its Avery Research Center for African-American History and Culture; he visited personally with the plantations in the early 1990s, asking them to acknowledge and deal honestly with their history.

Now the plantations are restoring slave cabins, planting vegetable and medicinal herb gardens and developing special programming to evoke the atmosphere in which slaves and their descendants lived and toiled, creating a powerful and unique culture despite enslavement.

The new-century potential for celebrating and capitalizing on Gullah culture is immense, says Bernie Mazyck, leader of the South Carolina Association of Community Development Corporations. It's not just the historic roots, but a wondrously distinctive, rhythmic Gullah language and dialect, food, music and artistry, including the sweetgrass baskets that are a virtual Charleston trademark. Another prime modern example: the wrought-iron work of the famed local blacksmith Philip Simmons, now in his 90s. Simmons' work recalls the artisan generations who came before him and added touches like the Barbados-inspired Rainbow Row on East Bay Street, making Charleston more fascinating than a conservative European-style city.

Most black people in the United States can trace their family's entry back to Sullivan's Island, where slaves were kept before being brought into Charleston for sale. Why not, says Mazyck, use the history to draw African-Americans from across North America for visits, meetings and 'homecoming' reunions? Among the ideas of a charrette

that Mazyck highlighted last spring was a memorial to slaves in downtown Charleston, a program of DNA testing for blacks interested in their heritage, and a 'Come Home to Carolina' reunion marketing campaign.

Can a fresh source not just of pride, but more jobs for the local black community, be fashioned out of that

effort and its many possible spinoffs? We'd bet so.

Lastly, the land and its promise

The Charleston region's persuasive conservationists constantly telegraph the message: While there's still time, let us preserve more of the swamps and marshy lowlands, the oak-lined forests, the seascapes and land buffers around them, that make the Lowcountry such a special place on the planet. A half-century from now, what will be more important — that irreplaceable landscape or yet another tax-producing golf course or gated retirement community?

But our final thought for this series is a variant: Couldn't this region's people reconnect with the land of their region through a revived and protected agricultural base?

Amanda Dew Manning, a 10th-generation South Carolinian whose family arrived in 1683 and tilled the land for centuries, tells of her amazement in returning six years ago (after serving in the Clinton administration Agriculture Department) to discover how much farmland had been lost to development. Much of the richest agricultural land on the Sea Islands, for example, had been gobbled up. There's been dozens of farmers; only a handful remained.

Manning (publisher of the new magazine *Edible Lowcountry*) shares with other enthusiasts a vision of farms restored, food grown locally for local homes and Charleston's famed restaurants. Here's a region where delectable lettuces, varieties of greens, spring onions, potatoes, asparagus, cantaloupes, honeydews, tomatoes and other products can be grown easily.

Local land costs too much, Manning acknowledges, for big-scale farming to return. But smaller, niche farming can prosper — there are nearby models in North Carolina and Georgia where small farms, most run by well-educated younger farmers in their 30s and 40s, are into sustainable agriculture, in some cases organic farming. They raise all sorts of specialty crops, raise grass-fed beef and heirloom pork, and make goat cheese. 'That kind of farming could have a real future in our Lowcountry, revitalizing the soil with organics, getting a lot out of just a couple acres of land,' says Manning.

And remaining African-Americans on heirs property lands could be given specialized technical assistance to readapt their families' historic farm skills to current practices and market demands, employing improved technology and far less grueling stoop labor than in the past.

A big recent plus: the announcement of South Carolina's Agriculture Commissioner, Hugh Weathers, of a marketing plan for in-state grown products — labeled 'certified South Carolina.' Fourteen supermarkets are participating. Farmers markets and roadside food-fresh food stands should also benefit.

What's still missing is a sophisticated Charleston-region food distribution system. There ought to be a reliable, predictable way, utilizing advance agreements and contracts, to channel fresh local products — seafood along with fresh produce — to the city's increasingly famous restaurants, to schools and hospitals and, of course, local food markets.

Big medical benefits could flow, say proponents, from more local consumption of nutritious, fresh, Charleston-region-based vegetables and fruits and meats. They'd not only provide a missing counterpoint to today's flood of nationally branded, plastic-wrapped, long-distance shipped products, many heavy in corn syrup sweeteners and trans fats, they could also contribute to reducing South Carolina's alarming obesity rates.

Couldn't the region lead America, not lag, in today's strong movement toward fresher, more local and more nutritious foods? Great foods from one's own sea and soils is a perfect fit to the themes poised to give the Charleston area its distinctive 21st-century brand: preservation, restoration, new technologies and inventive use of incredible historic resources. A sustainable Lowcountry future, we'd argue, depends on it.

Is housing for all a possibility?

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The ferocious housing inflation of recent years has made Charleston-area homeownership, or even an affordable apartment, hard for even average wage-earners to achieve. On top of that, the heavy pressures of gentrification are forcing people of less means out of their Charleston neighborhoods, often northward out of the city entirely.

'Do we want to be like Hilton Head, busing in people for the service-sector jobs?' asks Jeremy Browning of Habitat for Humanity. His organization produces a small number of affordable area units each year, as do local community-development organizations. A Lowcountry Housing Trust, just two years old, has made a start supporting a modest number of housing projects across the entire tri-county region.

But compared to need, the efforts are still small. Charleston Mayor Joe Riley refers to several successful projects in the city. Charleston was a pioneer among U.S. cities in insisting subsidized homes be indistinguishable from privately owned ones. But the process of maintaining sufficient housing is tough — 'We got quadruple hernias trying to save the Immaculate Conception School building from going high-end — now it's a tax-credit subsidized project,' Riley suggests.

Other U.S. regions are experimenting with inclusionary zoning, reserving a small share of a development's new units for more-affordable units. But South Carolina law forbids forcing developers to comply, and resistance to voluntary agreement is high. The typical Habitat for Humanity homeowner earns in the mid-\$20,000 range, Browning told us: 'Our houses blend into the community, don't stand out. But could we build in a new neighborhood? Are developers, or most towns, even interested in such a conversation? No.'

There's an easy political response in conservative South Carolina: Housing's a private deal, let the market decide. But encouraging income mixes across the region can have big payoffs. There's a mix of work force for employers. Neighborhoods are stronger and more crime-resistant. Schools are more likely to be more successful.

In today's politics, it's also fair to send a message of patriotism to communities that are leery of subsidized housing: Our returning Iraq war veterans have very limited financial resources. Are you making ready to provide affordable housing, an open door, for our returning heroes? And beyond that, isn't the America they're fighting for one that welcomes a cross-section of our people in every community?

Schools for the whole community

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Could 21st-century schools start to reknit our communities while providing critical basic education?

Terry Peterson of the College of Charleston, formerly top aide to former Gov. Richard Riley when he was U.S. Education secretary, says he thinks so. Stop thinking of schools as 8 a.m.-to-3 p.m. islands of specialized teaching services, he says. Instead, bring them back into the fabric of neighborhoods. Elementary and middle schools in his formula would be seen as community learning centers, open 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., for a full range of children's needs and interests — study hours, fitness and sports, community gardening, computer labs and more. Ideally, health, mental health, library and other facilities — services for the 'whole kid' — would be available as well.

Then, in the evening hours, the schools would offer courses for adults who missed basic learning as youngsters, or did poorly in school but could relearn (and improve their employability skills) comfortably in their own neighborhoods. It's a model already being tried in one North Charleston school, perhaps a regional model.

What about high schools? Peterson

What about high schools? Peterson favors, again, smaller learning communities — including the huge high schools broken into learning centers of no more than 400 to 500 students each. Major focus needs to be placed on personal attention, making the middle school-to-high school transition in which so many young people 'get lost' go more smoothly. Starting in eighth grade, a parent and community volunteer would sit down with a young person for an annual conference to gauge what it takes to keep him or her committed and on the way to post-high school learning. A related device: arranging visits to college campuses, encouraging youngsters to take the courses they'll need to qualify for entrance, and getting their parent or parents excited about the possibilities.

A model of this personalized design is already under way at Charleston's Burke High School, assisted by a team from the University of Charleston's School of Education.

All this breaks the normal 'school production' mode. And it all costs money — hard to find in normal school budgets, requiring special public contributions, in part through the region's United Way. But the caring message could be contagious. Indeed, it could be a way to draw more qualified and former certified teachers, even working part time, back into the schools. And the payoffs could be dramatic: a Charleston region more prosperous economically, less burdened by low-income dependency and free from its currently embarrassing high rates of crime.

But does all this have to occur in the 'silos' of individual county school systems? Not necessary, Peterson says. He suggests a tri-county experiment in collective — shared — learning across the region. As an example, pose the question: What are the eight, 10 or 15 economies of today's world? How do we learn more about them? One group of schools might pick China, study its economy and culture, offer courses in Mandarin. Another group could pick Russia and Russian, another perhaps Brazil and Portuguese.

With this kind of educational collaborative, no school, no district would have to feel left behind. And the cumulative impact: A modern world region, set beside a great port, using its schools to scope the world, could produce learning, focus and pride in the entire Charleston region.