

Minutes of the Jasper County Transportation Sales Tax Advisory Committee Meeting Date: June 20, 2025

The meeting was called to order. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited, followed by a prayer. Councilman Joe was in attendance.

I. Green Belt Ordinance and Application

Ms. Schaefer provided an update regarding the Green Belt portion of the sales tax.

- **Previous Recommendations:** At the last meeting, the committee recommended sending the **ordinance** to stand up the green belt sales tax portion to the Jasper County Council for review and approval.
- The committee also recommended sending the **draft application and scoring rubric** (used to evaluate green belt projects) to the County Council for review and approval.

II. Green Print Map: Conservation Priorities

The primary topic of the meeting was the Green Print Map, which serves as a starting point for identifying conservation priorities in Jasper County.

A. Source and Reliability

- Ms. Schaefer suggested the county should utilize existing data rather than hiring a consultant to create its own map.
- The map provided in the agenda packet originates from the **South Carolina State Conservation Bank**.
- The Conservation Bank is a state agency, established about 25 years ago, that has protected thousands of acres statewide. It recently awarded approximately **\$10 million to 26 projects** across the state.
- The Conservation Bank, in coordination with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), updates land protection priorities annually, providing Jasper County with the most recent data.
- The full suite of information has been sent to the county's GIS department and can be analyzed area by area and category by category.
- The map serves as a helpful guide, using 12 categories to inform the property score, but it is not an absolute. Ms. Schaefer recommended including it as a reference in the ordinance and application.

B. Conservation Data Highlights

- **Statewide Data:** South Carolina has about 20 million acres, 3 million of which are protected. The state has identified 8.5 to 8.6 million acres as medium or high conservation priorities, with about 2.5 million of those being high priority.
- **Jasper County Data:**
 - Total acres in Jasper County: 428,000 and some change.
 - Acres currently protected: Approximately **86,000 acres** (about 20% of the county).
 - Acres listed as medium to high priority: **298,000 acres** (about 70% of the county).
 - High priority land (shown as red on the map) is abundant in the county.

C. Data Layers Contributing to the Map

The composite map is created using individual data layers, including:

1. **Conservation Corridors:** Looks at priority landscapes next to existing protected land (over 500 acres). This layer also evaluates land important to the military (Department of Defense interest in forested land and farmland) and priority corridors up river systems and within Salt Marsh.
2. **Ecological Conservation Priority:** Addresses state species of concern, such as the flatwood salamander, gopher tortoise, and red cockaded woodpecker. Priorities "light up" along the Savannah River (Levy) and Broad River corridor.
3. **Sustainable Forestry and Agriculture (Economic Component):**
 - Forestry looks at distance to mills, managed forest land, and healthy timber stands. The Turkey Hill property around Ridgeland is anticipated to be a high priority.
 - Agriculture assesses soil drainage and productivity. Jasper County has medium priority for sustainable agriculture across the county.
4. **Water Resources:** Focuses on the "forests to faucets" concept, emphasizing the health of the Savannah River watershed for clean drinking water. The Levy New River area is high priority, as the New River is identified by DHEC as an outstanding resource water.
5. **Public Trails and Vistas:** Identifies scenic areas along roads (like the Liberty Trail, scenic highway 462) and scenic waterways, and analyzes proximity to people who would enjoy them. This area is also high priority in Jasper County.

D. Discussion on Efficiency and Wetlands

- **Financial Efficiency:** Discussion focused on the efficient use of the approximately \$94 million available. Mr. Kemp asked if funds should prioritize buying uplands (facing development threat) over purchasing wetlands (which are often protected by definition).
- Ms. Schaefer clarified that the appraiser determines the value, and land with jurisdictional wetlands is not typically counted for development potential. The application scoring will assess both financial efficiency and conservation efficiency.
- Applicants are required to identify the **threat of development** in their proposals.
- Mayor Williams noted that federal laws regarding wetlands have recently become weaker, meaning wetlands can potentially be filled or developed, sometimes requiring mitigation.
- **Funding Partners:** To maximize funding, the committee should look for applications that include funding partners (e.g., the military, Beaufort County, the State Conservation Bank, or landowners willing to donate value).

E. Application and Inter-County Partnerships

- **Applicants:** Recommended applicants include land trusts (e.g., Open Land Trust, Ducks Unlimited), state agencies (DNR), the county/towns (for parks), and independent, accredited third parties such as 501c3 organizations with experience in managing protected property. Individual landowners wishing to pursue an easement must work with a land trust or the town.
- **Regional Investment:** It was noted that Beaufort County's green space program allows investment outside the county (e.g., Gregory Neck). Mr. Fulgrim confirmed that bond attorneys have advised that the county has the ability to **spend the money outside the county and contract with other jurisdictions**.

III. Roadside Program Update

Mr. Iwanicki provided updates on the roadside projects.

- **Program Manager Selection:** Four firms submitted qualifications (RFQs) to be the program manager.
- The scoring team determined that **ICE (Infrastructure Consulting Engineers)** was the most favorable firm.

- The county is currently discussing contract terms with ICE and aims to finalize details the week of July 7th, with the goal of bringing the contract to the advisory body for approval in July.
- **Project Funding Transfer (Triangle Project and 278):** Funding for these projects slated for 2025 has been moved to 2026. This delay allows the committee and the new program manager time to determine whether to keep these projects federalized (on the TIP) or use only local funds to avoid federal red tape.

A. Roadside Discussion

- Mr. Moyd emphasized that **Levy Road** is dangerous, is experiencing booming development, and needs to be addressed sooner rather than later, especially with Exit 3 approaching.
- Mayor Williams suggested changing the acronym "ICE" to prevent public misunderstanding.
- The committee agreed that the program manager needs time to review the total funding and recommend the best path (local vs. federalized) for projects like the Triangle.

B. Financial and Audit Requirements

- The Treasurer has established a separate account for the transportation tax funds, though no state money has been received.
- The committee discussed the need for separate accounts for the 80% (roadside) and 20% (green belt) portions, but it was noted that one account is fine as long as funds are segregated.
- The county's current audit provider is being asked to submit a proposal to conduct a separate **annual audit**, as required by the referendum ordinance.

C. Information Management

- The program manager will be responsible for creating a **website** for the tax.
- The program manager will serve as the "go-to group" and "keepers of the information" for both the roadside and conservation data, ensuring the public receives information quickly and accurately.
- Once the program is established, the green belt applications will be reviewed and screened, and they will ultimately come to this committee for a suggestion on whether County Council should fund them.

IV. Next Meeting

The committee determined that waiting until August would be beneficial to allow Mr. Iwanicki time to finalize the program manager contract and for the County Council to approve initial recommendations.

- **County Council Meeting Date:** The County Council meeting is scheduled for August 18th.
- **Next Committee Meeting Date/Time:** Friday, August 22nd, at 10:00 AM.
- **Location:** County Council Chambers (preferred for acoustics and accommodation).
- **Administrative Actions:** A calendar invite is to be sent to all jurisdictions, including the school board. The agenda should be sent out no later than Friday, August 15th.

V. Adjournment

A motion to adjourn was made and approved.