

Minutes of the Jasper County Transportation Sales Tax Advisory Committee Meeting Date: January 22, 2025

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1. Call to Order and Opening Remarks

The first meeting of the Transportation Sales Tax Advisory Committee was called to order. The purpose of the committee, formed by ordinance for the referendum, is to give the public an ability to have input and ensure they are informed about the status of their investment.

The Chair noted that the committee will need to address the development of the committee given the guidelines, ensure continuity to account for changes in government, and develop stages to measure progress. The Chair noted that the referendum stops in 2040, but the committee's work is anticipated to last until at least 2050.

2. Overview of Committee Duties and Program Details

Mr. Kemp Jasper County Chair confirmed the official members of the advisory committee, **the Mayor of Hardeeville, the Mayor of the Town of Ridgeland, and the Chairperson of the School District board** (Dr. Gerald).

Advisory Committee Duties: The committee is tasked with annually assessing the projects proposed for construction, providing a recommendation to the County Council for the ranking of projects, and, with the assistance of County staff, preparing a report on project progress and status for presentation to local government councils. Any listed committee member may designate an elected member of their Council or Board to serve in their stead.

Transportation Sales Tax Program Overview:

- The ordinance for the program was adopted in July 2024.
- Collection will not exceed 15 years, potentially lasting until April 2040, or until the established yield of **\$470 million** is reached.
- The \$470 million is broken down as follows:
 - **80% (\$376 million)** is dedicated to 16 individual road projects, defined as roadway construction, intersection improvements, roadway widening, and interchange improvements.
 - **20% (\$94 million)** is slated for **Green Belt projects**. These projects are currently undefined but the ordinance states they include, but are not limited to, purchasing property for conservation, acquiring conservation easements, creating passive/active Green Space, and protecting natural resources, agricultural/heritage landscapes, and scenic corridors.
- County Council is authorized by the ordinance to bond up to **\$150 million** for these projects. The County Council has not yet discussed bonding, but staff will seek a recommendation from the committee and bring back information from their bond counsel. Dr. Gerald noted that using a bond is the fastest way to get projects completed.

3. Road Projects Update (Director of Engineering Services)

Director provided an update on the process for handling the road projects:

- **Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA):** All road projects are on SC DOT right-of-way, requiring their heavy involvement. The Director met with SC DOT representatives, and they are starting to draft an IGA. He estimates the IGA may come before County Council around the April–June timeframe.
- **Federal Funds:** The projects are federal aid eligible. The County needs to become a **Local Public Agency (LPA)** through SC DOT to help administer federal funds.
- **Program Manager:** There is an identified need to hire a program manager to serve as extended staff to manage the projects from engineering and financial standpoints.
 - The Director is working on a Request for Proposals (RFP) for a program manager.
 - Target timeline: RFP released mid-February, proposals back mid-March, and scoring/awarding in April or early May.
 - **Federal Funding Impact:** Using federal aid requires following the Federal process (including the **NEPA process**), which could add an estimated **12 to 18 months** just for environmental permitting before design work begins. While federal funds might be available, using local "one penny money" could save an estimated 10% on construction engineering and costs compared to federalized projects, though this is only a preliminary estimate. The program manager will evaluate whether leveraging federal dollars is justified.

Scoring Committee for Program Manager Selection: Mr. I requested input on forming a Scoring Committee to evaluate program manager proposals. He suggested one representative from Hardyville and one from Ridgeland, plus himself and Kim Burgess.

- **Dr. Gerald** stated that having a representative from the School Board would aid in understanding the project's impact on student transportation and agreed to send a representative.
- The Director requested that the committee members submit the names of their nominees for the evaluation committee as soon as possible, ideally within the week.

4. Green Belt Projects Discussion (Ms. Kate Schaefer, Open Land Trust)

Mr. Kemp noted that the Green Belt side is a "larger heavier lift" because all aspects are yet to be defined. The committee's ultimate goal is to recommend a program definition to County Council.

Conservation Program Strategy:

- Successful programs rely on quantitative and qualitative mapping to identify priorities.
- Mapping resources are available from the State Conservation Bank (in partnership with SC DNR) and locally from the Port Royal Sound Foundation.
- The objective is to establish goals (e.g., categorical protection percentage) and a **scoring rubric** for successful projects.
- The program requires defining ordinances and definitions, such as "eligible applicant" (e.g., land trusts, state agencies, municipalities, county agencies, but not landowners themselves).
- Required due diligence typically involves an appraisal, title commitment, survey, and environmental analysis.
- Ms. Schaefer suggested that the committee should not be overly restrictive with specific dollar or percentage amounts for different project types (easements vs. land acquisition vs. recreation) at the beginning.
- Mayor M. asked if a manager dedicated to the Green Belt side was necessary, similar to the transportation manager. Mr. Kemp agreed that staff is researching options, likely by looking at how the Open Land Trust works with Buford County.

5. Initial Discussion of Road Priorities

The committee moved to discuss initial priorities for the road list, acknowledging that this initial discussion is intended to set a framework, not make a final decision, as all decisions are ultimately up to the County Council.

Mayor of Hardeeville/South County Priorities: The Mayor suggested that the committee should prioritize projects that require significant design and engineering work quickly.

1. **Argent Boulevard:** Cited as the highest need due to voter turnout/support (56% of voters) and its inclusion on the LATS and Triangle project lists, which makes it easier to get design/engineering started. The goal is to start design/engineering immediately, potentially using bonding capability.
2. **Levy Road:** Identified as "low-hanging fruit" and an easy project to manage, engineer, and start right away.
3. **278 Widening:** Priority depends on SC DOT's decision, especially since Buford County did not pass its referendum.
4. **Widening of 170/17:** Important due to the immense industrial zone and its value as an evacuation route when Exit 3 becomes reality.

Dr. Gerald/School Board Priorities: Dr. Gerald stressed the necessity of addressing **321** because of congestion, especially during I-95 closures, impacting bus routes and evacuations. However, it was confirmed that **widening 321 is not included** in the current referendum road list, though intersection improvements along 321 are listed.

Staff Perspective (Mr. I): The Director noted that a list of priorities would help him incorporate needs into the RFP for the program manager. He reiterated that while larger projects (like Argent Boulevard) require upfront engineering, smaller projects like intersection improvements could get "asphalt down on the ground a little bit quicker" to show the public tangible progress.

Action on Priorities: The Chair suggested that each committee member should submit their top four priorities for road projects before the next meeting.

Green Belt Political Advantage: Ms. Schaefer reminded the committee that Green Belt projects, which enjoy strong public support, can move forward quickly, helping to demonstrate near-term success and public accountability.

6. Next Meeting and Action Items

The committee scheduled the next meeting for **February 24, 2025, at 1:00 p.m.** The location is hoped to be in-person rather than virtual.

Tasks for Next Meeting:

1. Committee members to submit their top four road priorities for discussion.
2. Committee members to submit the names of their nominees for the Program Manager Scoring Committee.
3. Staff to bring recommendations on the Green Belt policy/guidelines.
4. Staff to present information on the bonding capability.

7. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned.