



photo courtesy of the Regional Beaufort Chamber of Commerce

Horse drawn carriage before Rhett House, Beaufort

# *Beaufort County*

PROVES PHENOMENAL GROWTH IS POSSIBLE  
WHILE MAINTAINING AN AREA'S RICH HISTORY

BY BEN YOUNG

*Beaufort County* is arguably one of the most beautiful counties on the East Coast. The secrets are out and new residents are coming in droves. With an eye on how property taxes are skyrocketing in coastal communities, leaders are working overtime to brace for the brunt of the growth. As the wagon trains circle, the easygoing pace they are trying to protect remains intact, thanks to a number of intelligent approaches to planning new development.

Former mayor of Greenville Bill Workman was seduced by the challenge. The Charleston native was among many wondering how to maintain the fragile beauty of the South Carolina coast now that it has suddenly become so attractive to retirees, commuters and telecommuters searching for a nice place to live, when he took the job as City Manager for the city of Bluffton, population 3,500.

Located just outside Hilton Head Island, Bluffton has been a haven for artists and mariners living in eccentric, rural harmony, with unrivaled beauty along the unspoiled marshes. With the recent annexation of Palmetto Bluff, a 22,000-acre high-dollar estate, the city's population will double to 7,000, says Workman. Eventually, 25,000 people are expected to move here within 15 years, and that number may double before it is developed out. One would never guess that this is the fastest growing town in the state.

"In our main northwest estuary, you can still eat oysters right out of it," says Workman, who resembles a larger, grizzlier version of Fripp Island's most famous resident, Pat Conroy. "If we can keep it pristine in the midst of the growth, we'll be the only place in North America where you can do that."

The cities of Hilton Head and Beaufort are no less distinctive. This year marks the 50th anniversary of Sea Pines,

the smart-cool development by Charles Frazier that put Hilton Head on the map with first-rate residences and golf courses in walking distance to the white sand beach. Beaufort has preserved one of the prettiest downtowns along the coast, and is a cradle of the Gullah culture so essential to the Lowcountry identity.



Bay Street, Beaufort

And they are no less threatened by sudden impact. As Workman puts it: "The whole Eastern Seaboard is under pressure from retiring Baby Boomers by the millions, and hundreds of thousands of half-backs moving back up from Florida as far north as Virginia Beach." Bad weather has chilled the Gulf Coast real estate market, and the carefully preserved coasts of Georgia and South Carolina have never looked better.

Hilton Head Island (pop. 33,862) is also feeling the pressure, but it is primarily Bluffton, Beau-

fort, and the unincorporated county absorbing the newcomers. In addition to retirees, neighboring communities near Interstate 95 like Hardeeville and Jasper County are booming with commuters heading to Savannah (just a half hour away) and Charleston (an hour up the coast), and the county is feeling the overflow.

Leaders are taking urban approaches to diffusing what could become a crisis. With Sea Pines setting the standard – the roundabouts and off-road retail leading to the community seemed foreign decades ago, but now provide for easier non-automobile maneuvering – Bluffton is creating a similar "interconnecting set of self-sustaining villages," says Workman, and Beaufort is surrounding its historic downtown district with mixed-use urban town centers to reduce traffic congestion.

As many as 4,000 residential units are expected to come online in the next two or three years in Beaufort, the county seat of 12,376 people. With no

#### BEAUFORT COUNTY AT-A-GLANCE

##### Population:

Beaufort County, 135,725;  
City of Beaufort, 12,376;  
Bluffton, 3,500;  
Hilton Head Island, 33,862

##### Median Family Income:

\$52,704 (2002)

##### Unemployment rate:

4.5 percent (January 2006)

##### Top five employers:

Hilton Head Medical Center, 600;  
Wal-Mart Stores, 520;  
Hilton Head Marriott Golf and  
Beach Resort, 520;  
The Westin Resort, 450;  
Crowne Plaza Resort, 430

Source: Beaufort County Chamber of Commerce

beach along the marsh, historical tourism is the lifeblood of this economy (see sidebar), and protection is paramount. Accommodating new residents was a challenge that proved irresistible to would-be retiree Dick Stewart, a former Gwinnett County entrepreneur who saw a chance to put infill redevelopment lessons learned in the Georgia capital to good use here.

The result: Class A office space for the first time in Beaufort, mixed in with new condos ranging from \$695,000 to \$3 million near the city's historic district. A million plus square feet of retail in the works already includes classy names such as Talbot's, and an adjacent convention center may be in the works. At Beaufort Town Center, 1211 Newcastle Street and Jean Ribaut Square, Stewart's 303 Associates is planning ground floor retail with mid-rise condos in walking proximity to the downtown, Government Center and Beaufort Memorial Hospital.

How did Stewart bring mixed use to a "no-growth" town? Surprisingly quickly. "I retired in 1998, and began consolidating property in 2000," says Stewart. "It went relatively fast. From Atlanta, I brought the impact of sprawl, and the effect of having shopping centers on the outskirts of a community. The county was interested in bringing in more quality jobs. And in the post-Katrina climate, we're negotiating hard to mix in affordable housing to bring prices down. There are already savings, however, in the live-work-play model – at today's prices, it takes \$408 a month to operate a vehicle. If you eliminate one car, that's significant."

The redevelopment also resulted in the clean-up of a brownfield site caused by batteries left by the South Carolina Department of Transportation. "That led to a lot of positive feedback from surrounding neighbors," says Stewart. "By the time it's all over, we'll see about \$100 million in revenue from property that was producing very little."

An emphasis on preservation will benefit both Beaufort and Bluffton in attracting quality office jobs. "It's nice to be able to build on history without undermining it," says Stewart. "Hilton Head may be the most developed, but we've learned most from Savannah and Charleston, in terms of trying to be sensitive to our history."

But the fourth, unincorporated community massing in the northend of the county near I-95 may be harder to manage. "There is a swarm of development in the outlying area that may be trouble," says Stewart. "There is a big risk if we don't diversify our economy. A million new residents are expected in South Carolina over the next 15 years."

"It's not a new song," says the former executive director of Greater Beaufort-Hilton Head Economic Partnership, Inc., Heather Simmons Jones. "When I worked as an administrator in a neighboring county, there was lots of talk about service jobs and the need to improve wages. Then when the property tax reassessment came, some saw a 400 percent in-



Suite 207  
Old Bay Marketplace  
917 Bay Street  
Beaufort, SC 29902

*Providing Personalized Financial Solutions Throughout The Southeast*

**Rebecca W. Bass**

*Branch Manager*

Platinum Award Winner

Top Gun Award Winner

Toll Free: 888-696-1899

Mobile: 843-263-3772

Toll Free Fax: 888-696-6401

lowcountrymortgages@earthlink.net

www.beaufortscmortgages.com

crease. Residents want to know what the county is going to do. The answer is, beef up your local tax base to offset the burden on residential property owners."

Both Bluffton and Beaufort require stringent impact fees on residential development, but only jobs can absorb the impact of nonincorporated commuter growth. The county may have less than two percent of its tax base in manufacturing, but that may be about to change.