

Cities Mean **BUSINESS**

A PUBLICATION OF THE MUNICIPAL ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH CAROLINA

ISSUE 2 | 2018

Just Add Water

**Water can be a
boon to economic
development**

You see a police car...



We see a police officer who works closely with fire departments and EMS, who knows every business owner downtown, who can name every city street and who buys 12 snow cones on Saturdays even though his T-ball team has never won a game.

CITIES MEAN BUSINESS

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By Megan Sexton



Cover Photo:
The City of Conway's
three-phased riverwalk project
Photo: City of Conway.

Cities Mean BUSINESS

A publication of Municipal
Association of South Carolina

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Published by
SC BIZ NEWS
www.scbiznews.com

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Letter from the **EDITOR**



Reba Hull Campbell
*Editor and Deputy
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Summertime in South Carolina. For many of us, that means water, sun, travel, and getting out and about. This issue of Cities Mean Business takes a look at how several cities are making the most of our state's natural resources, tourists and connections to our communities.

The sun is doing more than keeping us warm outside on hot summer days. Find out what city leaders in Saluda, Hampton and Laurens are doing to invest in solar energy. All three cities are tapping a variety of solar options from installing panels on city hall to measuring solar energy usage on individual homes.

Our state is known for its diversity of tourism draws such as beaches, lakes, historic landmarks and trails. But Myrtle Beach and Surfside Beach approached the construction of new handicapped-accessible parks with lots of community input that's now translating into new visitors. At the same time, Gaffney is tapping into a little known historic asset to draw new visitors.

Water of any kind is a natural draw for tourists and visitors alike. Find out how Conway and Beaufort are fully leveraging the value of their waterfronts and read about how Pacolet is focusing on the Pacolet River as a community gathering spot.

City leaders around the state are seeking out new and creative gathering spots to solicit feedback from residents. Using social media and technology combined with creative face-to-face opportunities to meet with residents, Mount Pleasant, James Island, Moncks Corner and Bluffton have found new ways to engage the people who live in and visit their cities and towns.

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Editor

The public enjoys the promenade at Waterfront Park in the City of Beaufort, which is undertaking underwater infrastructure repairs and constructing a new day dock. Photo: City of Beaufort.



A NATURAL FIT: *CITIES AND WATERBODIES*

By Megan Sexton

Visitors to the City of Conway sometimes stand just a block from the Waccamaw River, not knowing how close they are.

But that is going to change. City officials are working through the permitting process with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to build a new 400-foot boardwalk section that will connect its river boardwalk to downtown. This is part of Conway's master plan to bring cohesiveness and public access to both areas.

Economic development plans, meanwhile, continue on a parallel track. Discussions in 2016 with the Burroughs Company, which owns land near the river, led to a public-private partnership with the city. The company agreed to donate real estate to the city. In exchange, the city will make infrastructure upgrades, including parking facilities, landscaping and utilities, to the benefit of the public and the company's remaining property and future development.

One restaurant, located in a historic building, is attached to the Conway Riverwalk, while a second building was recently sold and is expected to include a restaurant. Four new building sites near the riverwalk will include a hotel and other businesses, said Conway City Administrator Adam Emrick.

City officials used hospitality taxes to build the walkway and the park.

The city has a full-time grounds department that maintains the riverwalk and the surrounding landscaping. The city also installed wireless security cameras and has added a 100-foot transient boat dock on the riverwalk, the third dock on the promenade, Emrick said.

The latest developments cap decades of efforts by city officials to maximize the river's benefits for residents, visitors and businesses. Three phases of construction from 1993 through 2009 brought about the Conway Riverwalk, a source of pride for residents, many of whom walk along it every day,

including downtown workers who use it to grab some lunchtime exercise.

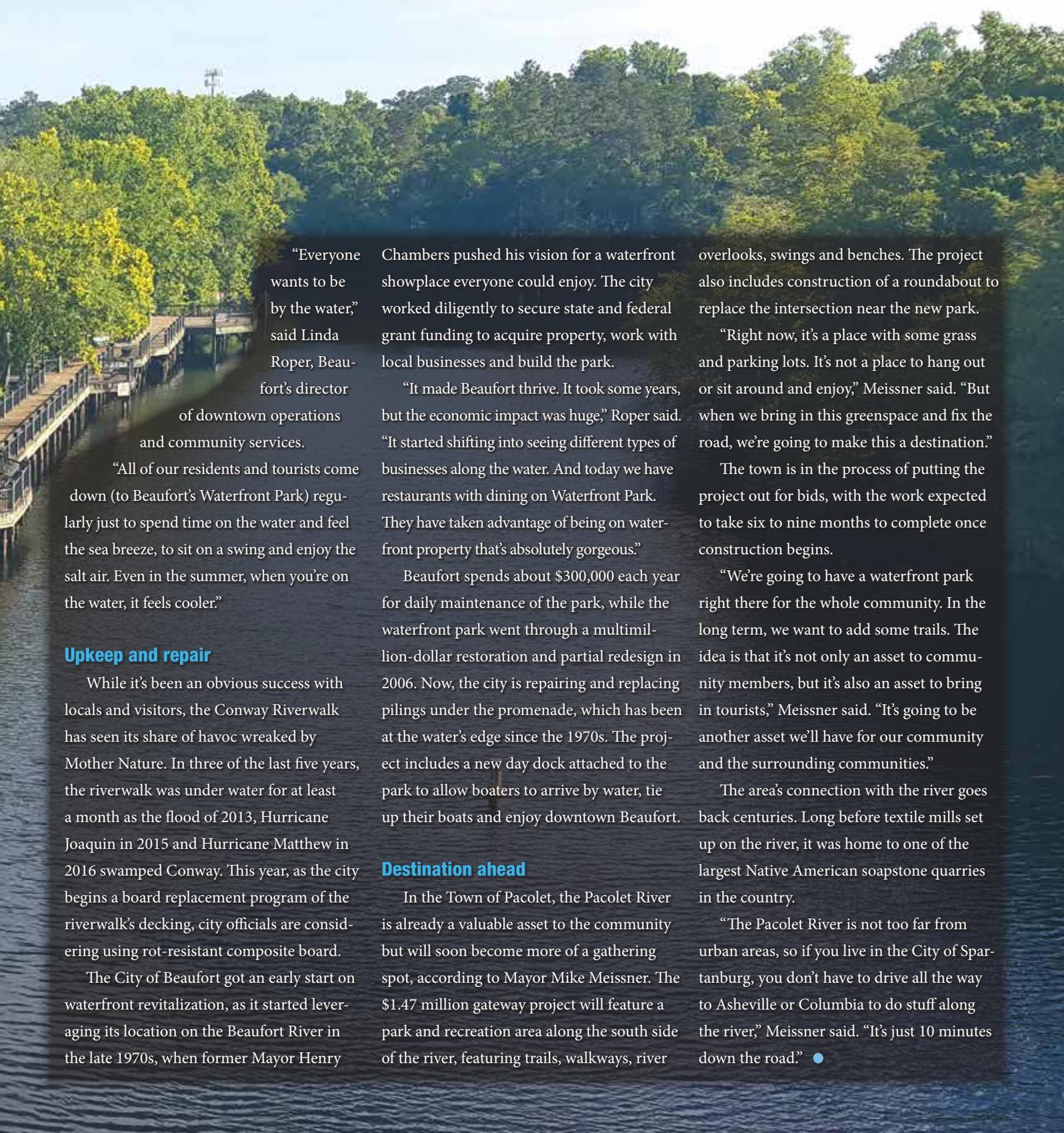
"The riverwalk is the physical tool that allows the river to be the experience," said Emrick. "When the riverwalk was constructed, the river, again, became part of who we were as a city and as a community. A renewed interest in the river as an amenity was immediate."

Conway illustrates just one way South Carolina cities are leveraging their natural water resources to enhance the quality of life, improve recreational offerings, and drive economic development and tourism. From the Conway Riverwalk to the new Pacolet River Passage Gateway Project to the Atlantic coast, municipal officials recognize the economic and quality-of-life benefits of their waterbodies.

The City of Beaufort's Waterfront Park is undergoing some improvements to enhance the seaside experience of residents and visitors.



The City of Conway's three-phased riverwalk project began in the 1990s and now includes a riverfront park, arboretum and boat ramp. Photo: City of Conway.



“Everyone wants to be by the water,” said Linda Roper, Beaufort’s director of downtown operations and community services.

“All of our residents and tourists come down (to Beaufort’s Waterfront Park) regularly just to spend time on the water and feel the sea breeze, to sit on a swing and enjoy the salt air. Even in the summer, when you’re on the water, it feels cooler.”

Upkeep and repair

While it’s been an obvious success with locals and visitors, the Conway Riverwalk has seen its share of havoc wreaked by Mother Nature. In three of the last five years, the riverwalk was under water for at least a month as the flood of 2013, Hurricane Joaquin in 2015 and Hurricane Matthew in 2016 swamped Conway. This year, as the city begins a board replacement program of the riverwalk’s decking, city officials are considering using rot-resistant composite board.

The City of Beaufort got an early start on waterfront revitalization, as it started leveraging its location on the Beaufort River in the late 1970s, when former Mayor Henry

Chambers pushed his vision for a waterfront showplace everyone could enjoy. The city worked diligently to secure state and federal grant funding to acquire property, work with local businesses and build the park.

“It made Beaufort thrive. It took some years, but the economic impact was huge,” Roper said. “It started shifting into seeing different types of businesses along the water. And today we have restaurants with dining on Waterfront Park. They have taken advantage of being on waterfront property that’s absolutely gorgeous.”

Beaufort spends about \$300,000 each year for daily maintenance of the park, while the waterfront park went through a multimillion-dollar restoration and partial redesign in 2006. Now, the city is repairing and replacing pilings under the promenade, which has been at the water’s edge since the 1970s. The project includes a new day dock attached to the park to allow boaters to arrive by water, tie up their boats and enjoy downtown Beaufort.

Destination ahead

In the Town of Pacolet, the Pacolet River is already a valuable asset to the community but will soon become more of a gathering spot, according to Mayor Mike Meissner. The \$1.47 million gateway project will feature a park and recreation area along the south side of the river, featuring trails, walkways, river

overlooks, swings and benches. The project also includes construction of a roundabout to replace the intersection near the new park.

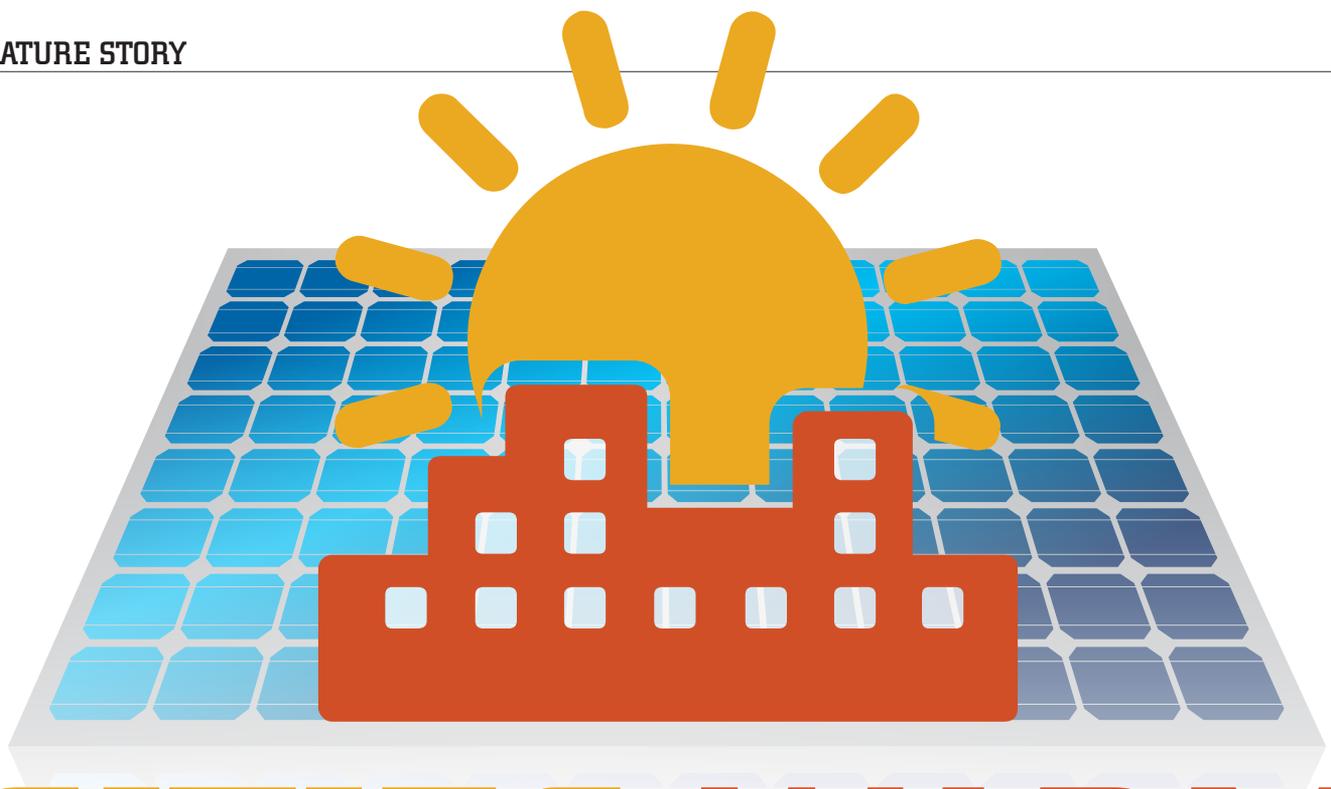
“Right now, it’s a place with some grass and parking lots. It’s not a place to hang out or sit around and enjoy,” Meissner said. “But when we bring in this greenspace and fix the road, we’re going to make this a destination.”

The town is in the process of putting the project out for bids, with the work expected to take six to nine months to complete once construction begins.

“We’re going to have a waterfront park right there for the whole community. In the long term, we want to add some trails. The idea is that it’s not only an asset to community members, but it’s also an asset to bring in tourists,” Meissner said. “It’s going to be another asset we’ll have for our community and the surrounding communities.”

The area’s connection with the river goes back centuries. Long before textile mills set up on the river, it was home to one of the largest Native American soapstone quarries in the country.

“The Pacolet River is not too far from urban areas, so if you live in the City of Spartanburg, you don’t have to drive all the way to Asheville or Columbia to do stuff along the river,” Meissner said. “It’s just 10 minutes down the road.” ●



CITIES WARM UP TO SOLAR

By Megan Sexton

Saluda Town Administrator Tom Brooks says he has just one regret about the decision to install solar panels to power town hall — he didn't go far enough.

"We stuck our toe in the water to see how it feels. We should have signed up all our buildings at the time," Brooks says. "It's expensive, but the payback is there."

Saluda was one of the state's first cities to install solar panels, tapping into the buzz around solar energy and its potential savings.

"We realized power bills were always going to go up," said Brooks. "We started talking to the (state) Energy Office. They had

some great programs, and SCE&G had some good programs for government agencies. The timing was right. And when we looked at the numbers, it was a no-brainer."

Through the Energy Office, the town received a ConserFund loan, allowing Saluda to borrow money at a low interest rate to put in solar panels and retrofit Town Hall with energy-efficient light bulbs. The town also worked closely with SCE&G and the company's renewable energy team.

Saluda now receives a credit on each electric bill for the energy it puts back on the power grid. The town has a 10-year contract to sell power generated at Saluda Town Hall

to SCE&G. The project is expected to pay for itself after 3½ years, so the town will be making money for 6½ years.

"We were pleasantly surprised. We were hoping it would be a quick payback, and in a year it has proven itself" said Brooks.

"It's weather dependent, so on cloudy days, you are not making as much money," he added. "You have months that are good and months that are not so good. But looking at the charts, the only month that we were down in generation from expected was December. Every other month we met or exceeded the (power) generation," he said.

Low-interest loans

While local governments can't take advantage of tax credits often available for solar projects in residential and commercial buildings, some utilities have special incentives for certain public sector customers. The S.C. Energy Office has a low-interest loan program (currently 1.5 percent interest rates) that can be used for solar projects by local governments and nonprofits, if the projected savings are high enough, according to Trish Jerman, manager of energy programs for the office.

Additionally, grants and loans to help pay for solar installations may be available for local governments in rural areas as part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Energy for America Program.

The Town of Hampton has also taken a step toward solar. Robert Poston, Hampton's director of building and zoning, says the town took over a dilapidated mobile home park at the same time the local regional water system was looking into solar power.

"The mobile home park was inside the town limits and was a nuisance to us," Poston says. "It's contiguous to the wastewater treatment plant. When this option came up, we put our heads together. We all came together and worked it out."

Located on about seven acres owned by the town, the solar farm is expected to produce about 2,106 megawatt hours of electricity a year, the equivalent of what it takes to power 147 homes. Solar energy will now provide all power to the wastewater treatment plant, a savings of about \$25,000 a year in operating costs, Poston said. The town, Low-country Regional Water System and SCE&G all worked together on the project, with the solar farm participating in SCE&G's Solar Energy Non-Residential Bill Credit Program.

"It's got our folks in town interested in solar," Poston said. "We want to start looking at powering other facilities as well — maybe Town Hall and the fire department."



The Town of Saluda received a ConserFund loan to assist with installing solar panels, making it one of the first cities in the state to use solar energy. Photo: Town of Saluda.

Hampton's solar project won a 2017 Municipal Association Achievement Award.

'Do your homework'

Brooks of Saluda said towns looking to tap into solar energy should get in touch with the state's Energy Office to see if it's the right move and look into power usage and how long it takes to pay back the investment.

"Make sure the program fits for you. You don't want to invest in something that's going to take too long to pay back," he says. "We've seen a lot of big solar farms around Saluda. We didn't influence those, but there are a lot of small businesses and agriculture businesses interested in solar. We thought, 'Let us try at Town Hall and see how it works before a business jumps into the game.' Hopefully we can be a model."

Before venturing into solar energy, municipalities and energy industry leaders point out the importance of dealing with a reputable solar contractor with a proven work history. The cheapest option may not always be the best.

"Do your homework and make sure they have a track record," Brooks said. "The

last thing you want is to invest \$60,000 or \$70,000 on solar, and then the company goes out of business."

Be skeptical

Keith Wood, the operations director for the Laurens Commission of Public Works, said customers should be skeptical about some solar company claims that power bills will drop immediately after solar panels are installed.

Laurens CPW puts in two meters in homes that convert to solar. One of the meters measures the energy the home is pulling in from the town and the excess energy the home is pushing back out. The second meter runs from the panels to the load center or breaker panel in the house, measuring when the solar panel produces energy.

"I want to be able to read both meters. Then we can say, 'Here's the power you use, and here's the power your solar panel produces,'" Wood said. "We do it on peak and off peak times. This way they can know what they're consuming in their house and can apply the retail rate to that, so they can see what they are avoiding." ●



CITIES TAKE THE PULSE

By Sarita Chourey

When Jeffrey Lord looked across the room full of residents in front of him, most of them were staring down at their phones, texting during his presentation. But he didn't mind. In fact, it was just as he'd hoped.

Lord, the town administrator of Moncks Corner, was using a web-based audience response system to gather instant opinions during a meeting about whether the town should start offering emergency medical services. As residents texted their answers, a bar graph on a screen at the front of the room shifted in real time to reflect their views.

"A lot technical things go into the decision of EMS, so this was a way to keep them engaged," said Lord of the Poll Everywhere program.

"A lot of questions were like, 'How long do you think it should take for an ambulance to get to you?' That led into the conversations about response times. It was kind of a way to check people's expectations to standards."

It's still true that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. But Moncks Corner and other cities have found ways to make sure that all parts of the vehicle — not just the wheels — are also heard.

"A lot of times you only get the most diehard on one side of the issue," Lord said. "When in fact, a large part of the constituency is concerned but would rather not stand up to speak."

While cellphones are handy, colored dots can work, too. In the Town of James Island, residents got to weigh in on the town's Pinckney Park design and amenities as part of its

"dotmocracy," a concept the town learned about from the Town of Mount Pleasant.

It worked like this: Town officials gathered residents in a room, wrote down everyone's suggestions and handed each resident some color-coded dots. The dots had points assigned to them, allowing residents to give an idea the appropriate dot to correlate to how strongly they felt about a given suggestion.

The dotmocracy event allowed residents to rank future park amenities and attributes, such as whether the park should have restrooms, alcohol allowed, a historical interpretive center, disk golf and other features.

A list of about 50 suggestions in order of dot-based rank — a special events stage, a canoe and kayak launch, and "marsh left alone" ranked the highest — is posted on the James Island website.

Most recently, James Island used the dot-mocracy method to find out what residents wanted in a new town hall.

“The architects posted a great deal of inspiration images on the walls, and residents placed dots on the images that appealed to them the most,” said James Island Town Administrator Ashley Kellahan.

Reaching beyond council chambers

When Jake Broom started in his position as administrator for the City of Goose Creek in 2016, he introduced himself through the city’s Facebook account.

Soon afterward, “Ask the Administrator” was born, a chance for residents to get real-time answers from Broom by posting questions to the city’s Facebook page and receiving responses. Residents wanted to know about the city’s finances, the status of the fire department’s radio system, dead tree removal, speeding concerns in a particular neighborhood and whether a dog park would be opening.

“Ask the Administrator” also helped combat rumors that spread across Facebook pages that weren’t affiliated with the city. The most common rumor was that the city was picking and choosing which businesses could come into the city. Broom’s “Ask the Administrator” sessions, which were then shared on the noncity pages where some rumors had flourished, helped put those rumors to rest.

“The belief existed that certain businesses are not here because we don’t want them here,” Broom said. “But that’s not true. So we let them know what’s going on and how we’re working to recruit these businesses. ... We’re doing all we can to recruit the types of businesses they want to see, but that’s something they’re not necessarily aware of unless we tell them.”

The way Broom sees it, of the tens of thousands of city residents, only 30 may show up to a City Council meeting.

“But about two or three thousand will see my Facebook posts,” he said. “The reach is exponential.”

‘Crystalizing public opinion’

Polling the public first often leads to better decisions and also better-received decisions.

In one year — from 2016 to 2017 — the number of business license applications that poured into the Town of Bluffton increased by nearly 11 percent, from 2,809 to 3,104 applications.

Even before that, however, Bluffton officials were trying to figure out how to make the business licensing process both more user friendly and more business friendly. In April, the town hosted a public meeting to discuss various ideas. But that’s not all they did.

They put a business owner survey on Facebook and the town’s website, distributed a press release to local media and residents’ distribution lists, and also informed the local

Chambers of Commerce of the meeting and survey.

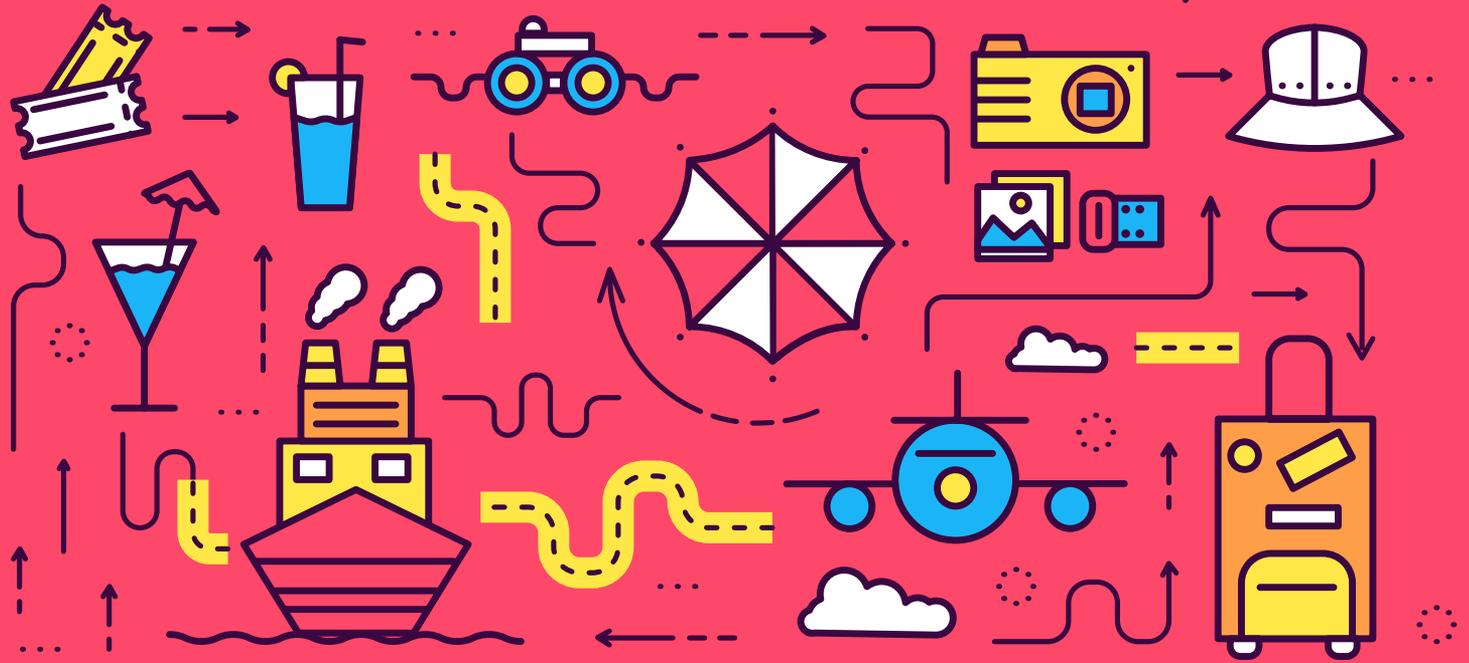
While only a handful of business owners showed up to the public meeting, representatives of a real estate agent association and the Chamber of Commerce attended and spread the information to hundreds of their members. Several ideas took shape, including special incentives for in-town businesses, discounts for startups during their first few years and changes to the license renewal date.

“When Town Council embarks on updating or streamlining an existing ordinance, such as the business license law, it is the town’s duty to ask what works best with its business owners,” said Debbie Szpanka, public information officer.

“Crystalizing public opinion is a part of the process.” ●



The City of Goose Creek’s Facebook page features a photo of Administrator Jake Broom’s office door to signal residents it’s time for anyone with questions to post them for the “Ask the Administrator” chat.



TOURISTS SEEK NICHE

By Sarita Chourey

Theme parks, stadiums and performing arts venues make great tourist attractions, but they're not the only sites that draw visitors and send ripple effects to local businesses.

An eye for what's possible and a strategic approach can help make the most of a city or town's unique assets — from natural features to historical sites to amenities-based appeal to medical, sports-related or culinary tourism.

Inclusivity draws families

Families with children on the autism spectrum have particularly good reasons to vacation in the Town of Surfside Beach — and to return year after year.

The Town of Surfside Beach is an autism-friendly tourism destination, thanks to one resident's initiative, the Champion Autism Network. Families can produce the CAN card, which participating businesses and other establishments will recognize, alerting employees to the presence of a family with a member

who has autism. CAN provides training on autism-friendly operations to employees of participating organizations and businesses.

"The CAN card was a really easy way for our families to identify themselves in a graceful way without a big scarlet letter A, like 'here we come with autism,'" said Becky Large, executive director of CAN.

Establishments that recognize the card sometimes offer a discount or special care, such as allowing a family with a child who has autism to move to the front of the line if there is a significant wait.

The organization also trains churches and businesses on operational considerations, puts out public service announcements and holds sensory-friendly events, such as movies.

"Having a niche tourism initiative is great for any community," said Large. Families with children who have autism are especially loyal to a place, she added.

Because those on the spectrum crave familiar surroundings, if a family visits

a particular hotel suite and has a good experience, Large said, they are very likely to return to that exact same hotel suite the following year.

"And they're going to go home and tell their friends," she said.

CAN has 350 local families in its database and nearly 450 tourism families who travel to Surfside Beach.

"The town is really supportive. We're training their lifeguards and the police, and we already trained some police and fire department last year," Large said, adding that it is especially important to work with public safety officials due to the possibility a child with autism could run away.

"Our police here in Surfside Beach need to know how to approach them," Large said.

The City of Myrtle Beach, meanwhile, won a Municipal Association Achievement Award this year for Savannah's Playground Enabling Park, which offers a variety of equipment that complies with the Americans



Families may produce the Champion Autism Network's CAN Cards at restaurants and other establishments in the Town of Surfside Beach to be recognized for special care. Photo: Becky Large, CAN executive director.

with Disabilities Act. The park features a zip line, specially designed swings, rubber surfaces to soften falls, an extended wheelchair ramp that stops at stations, a cooling mist feature during the summer and a mile-long wheelchair path that goes around the lake.

Online reviews of the playground from as far away as Canada indicate that visitors came specifically to visit the playground. In doing so, those families have also patronized restaurants, shops and other recreational activities nearby.

Surrounded by history

In the City of Gaffney, officials knew they had a unique tourism opportunity. Visitors would journey to the area to research their ancestors who fought in the American Revolution. After all, the city is nestled among national treasures that include three national parks about the Revolutionary War — Kings Mountain National Military Park, Cowpens National Battlefield and the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail.

But the city was attracting only about 500 tourists annually. So, city employees decided to study visitor habits, said LeighAnn Snuggs,

director of the city's marketing and tourism department.

"We spent those first few years asking, 'How did you hear about us?'" she said. "And now we specifically target them." Their efforts paid off. Three years later, the city welcomed 10,000 tourists.

While the Gaffney peach water tower became a favorite among "House of Cards" fans, Snuggs said the Peachoid is not as central to the city's tourism as the national parks and the historic gems of downtown Gaffney.

"We love the peach, but it really isn't our No. 1," she said.

When the 2011 federal government shutdown caused the parks to close, the City of Gaffney hosted a celebration of the Battle of Kings Mountain in historic Capri Theatre in the city's downtown.

Although the parks soon reopened, a partnership between the National Park Service and city officials established Gaffney as a historic tourism destination drawing curious visitors researching their genealogy.

"There was no partnership with the NPS before that time," said Snuggs. "We promoted that we had national parks, but there was in no way the relationships that we have had since."

The city also leveraged the scenic beauty of its surroundings. It used accommodations tax revenue to produce an advertising-free pamphlet with information about S.C. Highway 11, called the *Cherokee Foothills National Scenic Highway Travel Guide*. The project won a state tourism award and has been the second-most popular item in welcome centers, said Snuggs.

"The No. 1 draw for tourists is not going to be 'What everyone else is doing?'" said Snuggs. "It's 'what's unique to you? What can you do that others can't do?'"

There's more ahead.

"We're working on a project now, called 'Centuries of History, a Walking Tour,'" said Snuggs.

"We are celebrating our main street downtown as the Revolutionary War Trail from 1780. We have 18th, 19th and 20th centuries to celebrate, so we are putting up information about the street names and why the streets were named what they were."

The efforts of South Carolina's cities and towns has caught the attention of the state's top tourism official. Cities in South Carolina are a key reason why tourism is a \$21.2 billion industry, said Duane Parrish, director of the S.C. Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism.

"Our city destinations have done an incredible job identifying authentic attractions they can offer to visitors," he said. "They work well with regional and state marketing organizations to promote their best attributes to the nation and the world." ●



Savannah's Playground in Myrtle Beach draws families and children of all abilities to enjoy the unique amenities.



The Cowpens National Battlefield attracts history buffs, visitors researching their ancestors and Revolutionary War re-enactors, such as these women in period attire.

HOMETOWN SNAPSHOT



Photo/Andrew Sprague

Created in 1990, Waterfront Park is located along approximately one-half mile of the Cooper River in Charleston. The park received the 2007 Landmark Award from the American Society of Landscape Architects and the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

You see a street...



We see a lifeline that is a hometown with planned traffic flow, fire stations, thousands of visitors each year, city parks and community centers for children of all ages. Our streets take us to our jobs, our churches, our fun places and even to grandma's house.

