

Step into the light on utility policy

IT COSTS JUST PENNIES a day and provides safety and convenience. Yet that outdoor light is a black hole into which your money disappears, according to some area residents.

Property owners associations from around the region have been meeting with Santee Cooper officials for months to resolve their complaints about the state-owned utility's street light rental program. The timing couldn't have been better. Some state lawmakers are eager to sell the utility, which was a partner in the failed construction of a nuclear plant. Although Santee Cooper is the local power company for Waccamaw Neck residents, it is a statewide provider of electricity to regional electric co-ops. Working with the concerned POAs on outdoor lighting was a good way for the utility to strengthen support of its core customers.

The POA members who were optimistic at the start of the discussions are now having doubts. Santee Cooper says the outdoor lighting program is a service, not a profit center. But as the utility shifts toward energy efficient LED bulbs, it has exposed the underlying flaw in the program.

The monthly charge that a customer pays for an outdoor light and a pole pays for the cost of the fixtures in three years. But the fee never goes down. Instead, the customer has the assurance that the light will be maintained, repaired or replaced if the need arises. Over 25 years, a basic fixture will cost the customer \$5,000 more than it cost the utility. Multiply that by hundreds of fixtures that exist in some neighborhoods and you begin to understand why the POAs are troubled. They want a break once the fixtures are paid off.

Santee Cooper initially offered the associations a choice: pay the monthly fee or ask to have the fixtures removed. It said it couldn't sell the fixtures because of a provision in state law that only Santee Cooper's surplus property can be sold without approval of the legislature. An opinion from the state Attorney General's Office last month pulled the plug on that claim. Only transmission and generation assets are restricted, according to the opinion. It suggested that Santee Cooper officials may have confused the generation of electricity with the generation of revenue.

With the shift to LED bulbs, the cost of the fixture goes up but the cost of electricity goes down. Consumers understand that the savings from energy efficiency are long-term. But the problem is that Santee Cooper's fixture cost never goes away. This shouldn't be hard to change. It's like offering an extended warranty. Consumers should be able to decline. They may pay more in the future, but that will be their choice. For Santee Cooper, the payback will be in the form of goodwill.

Readers invited to write letters

The Coastal Observer welcomes letters from readers on topics of public and personal interest.

Letters should include the writer's name, address and daytime phone number.

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read with interest, but cannot be printed.

Send letters online at coastalobserver.com or by email to letters@coastalobserver.com or by mail to P.O. Box 1170, Pawleys Island, SC 29585.

Skateboarding

Park isn't complicated

To the editor:

I have read with interest Jackson Robino's and Ashley Alley's letters regarding a skate park at Pawleys; I am proud of both for exercising their rights as citizens to express themselves through free speech. I fully support them and agree with the need

Actually, all that's needed is a concrete slab. Skaters and parents can make their own ramps, jumps, etc. and bring in things such as rails. This is how the Matt Hughes Skatepark in Myrtle Beach began. Helmets were required, signs were posted with rules and risk of liability and skaters self-policed themselves. I have taken many youth there in earlier years, and the police would stop by now and again to enforce the helmet rule. It would do well to have a

fence around it as well as a mini set of bleachers.

Certainly, a professional skate park with bowls and such would be wonderful and perhaps will come one day. If I'm not mistaken, I think such a skate park is in Georgetown County Council's long-term recreation plans. A slab of concrete and fence on already-owned county land doesn't appear something that needs "study" or "readings" or such. Concrete and chain-link fence. It's healthy, outdoors, and would partially relieve HOA members from their relentless work of seeking offenders of their sacred rules and regulations (fun and freedom seeming to be major offenses).

Ricky F. Ferdon
Georgetown

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Tech park rezoning

Apartments won't be affordable housing

To the editor:

I am writing to add yet another voice to the opposition of the proposal for the Petigru property by Graycliff Capital Partners to build 182 luxury apartments on this flood prone, forested wetland tract.

This proposal once again ignores the warnings of increased density in the Waccamaw Neck and threatens the protection of our environmental resources not to mention the sanctity of a historic community that has repeatedly told the developer they do not want this type of development in their neighborhood.

It is important to understand the motivation of Graycliff Capital Partners. By their own definition, Graycliff is a "dynamic, data driven, real estate investment firm." They are known to our community. Think

Waterleaf Apartments in Murrells Inlet, where they cut down 71 protected trees on the property. Think Litchfield Oaks, which they purchased in 2013 for \$16.6 million then sold six years later for \$21.7 million.

And now, they come to us with another proposal that will accomplish the goals of return on investment for their investors, all the while ignoring the desires of our most important asset, our community.

While Graycliff does own an in-house management firm, properties are held only for the length of time profits are recognized, then they typically sell their acquisitions and move on. Therefore, no plea from this company regarding concern for our community can be taken seriously.

Furthermore, nowhere in their mission statements

or supporting publications will you find a word regarding environmental protection or concern for affordable housing.

In fact, every description of their acquisitions in multiple publications describe their properties as Class A luxury units. They all describe "high-quality finishes, stainless steel appliances, custom cabinetry, granite countertops ... upscale complexes with resort style amenities." These units certainly cannot be confused with affordable housing, as affordable housing would not offer Class A investments, which can be described as, "newer properties built within the last 15 years with top amenities, high income earning tenants and low vacancy rates."

Let us all remember that our own Planning Commis-

sion members voted unanimously not to approve this project in this location. It simply does not allow our community to meet its own self-described goals found in our land use agreement and heard resoundingly from our citizens, 900 of whom signed a petition in opposition.

This project was scheduled for a vote by the County Council this month. At the request of the developer, the council agreed to defer the vote. In the meantime, please let your voices be heard. It is safe to say that with the recognized growth being realized in our community, responsible, thoughtful development should be our goal moving forward, and we all should be paying close attention.

Amy Jones
North Litchfield

Council should stand up for community values

To the editor:

The mission of Georgetown County government is to promote health, safety, knowledge and welfare of citizens. Number one on the list is to protect our unique environment by managing our open spaces, rivers, beaches, ecological areas and natural resources in a manner consistent with the community's values and priorities.

I honestly haven't seen a lot of this happening in the last few years, but I do have reason to hope. On Jan. 21, the Planning Commission voted unanimously to deny a resolution to amend the future land-use plan to allow a zoning change that would open the door for a 182-unit apartment complex on Pettigru Drive. This is the second unanimous vote to deny this plan that they have made.

Decisions like this are critical to this area.

When Georgetown County set out to designate zoning districts for the first time in the 1970s there was no way officials could have foreseen how those decisions would play out. Zoning changes, special ex-

ceptions and changes in priorities over the years have made this county and its districts what they are today.

There was a time when every time I came here there was a new business, a new fast-food establishment, a new restaurant, a new bank, a new grocery store, drug store, medical building, car wash or gas station. I can still remember seeing the first Suck, Bang, Blow go up and wondering what the heck was happening here.

Nothing, not even SBB, has awakened me more than what has happened in the last two years. The amount of new development appearing on the horizon every day now is astounding.

What we see today is the result of decisions made by our county administrators, planning staff, the Planning Commission and our County Council members of years ago. Decisions made in 2004, 2005, 2009, 2015 and who knows when are having a major impact on how we live today. What happens today will impact our tomorrows.

So you might wonder, is anyone even paying attention to all this? The good news is, yes. New studies have been conducted and more are on the way. The bad news is, the conclusions are sobering. The Georgetown County Hazard Mitigation Plan and Gov. McMaster's study on floodwaters point to the need to do something and do it now.

The county just announced a stormwater study to the tune of \$750,000. This is a lot of money for a county of this size, but this is just a drop in the bucket compared to what it will cost to fix what we created. The money for these projects and the funds to maintain them comes from the pockets of the taxpayers. That is why when we speak, our officials should listen.

All of which brings me to the main purpose of all of this: to publicly thank the members of our Planning

Commission. Chairwoman Elizabeth Krauss for abstaining. Commissioner Johnny Weaver for his recusal and members Freddie Hill, Zannie Graham, Zach Grate and Sandra Bundy for making this a better place for all of us. Thank you for donating many hours of your time to hear and respond to our asks.

These are unpaid appointees who have been asked to vote on some of the most controversial plans, the ones that have drawn so much opposition that they are withdrawn and never even get to County Council.

I only hope that County Council will honor the mission statement of the county they have been elected to serve and decide to act "in a manner consistent with the community's values and priorities" on all matters going forward. The community has spoken. Your turn.

Beverly Sullivan
Litchfield Country Club

Santee Cooper

Senate should back sale

To the editor:

I am appreciative of the efforts of the S.C. House on the issue of selling debt-ridden Santee Cooper.

House Speaker Jay Lucas has led the charge to get the best deal for Santee Cooper for ratepayers. At the same time, Speaker Lucas and others in the House have made it clear they won't tolerate any more missteps or misinformation from Santee Cooper. Enough is enough.

The reality is that Santee Cooper's rates are not the lowest in the state. According to recent information presented to the Public Service Commission, two investor-owned utilities, Duke Carolinas and Duke Progress, have rates that are

9 and 5 percent below Santee Cooper's rates respectively.

On a national level, NextEra's Florida Power and Light has rates that are 30 percent below the national average, much lower than Santee Cooper's.

Santee Cooper's grandiose "reform" plan to pay off its huge \$7 billion debt, while at the same time investing hundreds of millions of dollars in clean energy is a pipe dream. The only way this can happen is through even higher rates.

For ratepayer's sake, I hope the S.C. Senate follows the House's lead on Santee Cooper.

Dick Richards
Murrells Inlet