

They Saved **PARADISE**

In total, the county has spent \$28.5 million of its \$40 million bond referendum approved by voters in 2000 to preserve open space, and the remaining \$11.5 million will likely be expended in the next few months. This leaves open the possibility that the county will pursue another bond referendum. County Councilman Peter Lamb of Bluffton, who Marane says is one of the land-acquisition program's biggest champions, went on record in December supporting such a referendum.

"The program has been extremely successful," Lamb says. "And because of this, I believe there is hope for another referendum. This program needs to continue forever. It is important to have the citizens understand how successful this first phase has been, and hopefully they'll enthusiastically endorse the second phase."

Signs of momentum for another referendum are visible. "Open space" tied for sixth on a list of 53 issues voiced by members of the Southern Beaufort County Regional Plan Steering Committee last September. At the top of the list was "congestion on U.S. 278." "Open space" ranked sixth again on a long list of priorities formed in a public workshop held in December by the steering committee. "Controlling growth" topped the list.

The county's land acquisition program, following the very successful bond referendum vote in 2000, had a rough start. At that time, the county hired The Nature Conservancy to administer the program, but the conservancy, for a number of controversial reasons, ended its contract early.

The conservancy's leadership cited a lack of unified vision among

county leaders about the program's focus and the kind of properties that should be acquired. "This lack of unity has made it close to impossible to find any consensus on specific projects and that has stymied efforts to complete land purchases," said Mark Robertson, executive director of the state's Nature Conservancy chapter.

County Council members responded they had, indeed, made their intentions known and blasted the conservancy's lack of progress.

With the departure of the conservancy, acquisition efforts continued through the work of a county ad-hoc committee under the eye of the county's Rural and Critical Lands Preservation Board and County Council.

In October 2003, the county hired TPL, bringing Marane and Slade Gleaton, TPL's coastal program director based in Charleston, on board to recharge the program and carry out the county mandate. Gleaton handles purchases in northern Beaufort County, and Marane handles southern Beaufort County. They also conduct programs elsewhere in South Carolina as well as in Georgia.

TPL's high-energy approach is obviously one of the main reasons the program is now flourishing. Another reason has been the county's reconfiguration of its Rural and Critical Lands Preservation Board. The board's makeup, by ordinance, was too restrictive and not diverse enough, many people thought, plus there were often difficulties in having a quorum of board members at the meetings. The board now has been reformatted to include representatives from all 11 County Council districts.

Steve Riley, town manager for Hilton Head Island and chairman of

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