



Photo source: Design Workshop

SPOTLIGHT: ST. HELENA

St. Helena Island is home to Beaufort County's largest Gullah/Geechee community. Gullah/Geechee communities are comprised of descendants of enslaved people brought from West Africa. The historic isolation of the County's barrier islands was crucial to the survival of this culture. As in other parts of the Southeast, Gullah/Geechee culture is under extreme stress from rapid coastal development, population growth, lack of recognition, and financial hardship. Growth has the potential to substantially alter the traditional social and cultural character of Beaufort County's Gullah/Geechee community, as new residents bring different values and customs.

The existing Cultural Protection Overlay (CPO) District protects St. Helena Island from gentrification that

would result in a greater demand for services and higher property values, making it more difficult and costly to maintain the traditional rural lifestyle on the Island.

Beaufort County's Gullah/Geechee communities face other unique challenges brought on by increased development pressure. When the County was primarily rural, large tracts of agricultural and forested land, regardless of ownership, provided the Gullah/Geechee community with access to waterways, oyster beds, hunting grounds, and other elements of the natural environment that were lifelines for the community. New development, especially along high-value waterfront property, has limited entry to these traditional hunting and fishing

grounds. In addition, many of the older cemeteries, which play an important role for the Gullah/Geechee community, are located within the original plantations, on private property, making them difficult to access.

Beaufort County's Gullah/Geechee community makes evident that the region's cultural resources are not just the historic sites, waterways, sacred grounds, farmlands, open spaces, hunting grounds, and the land on which traditional events have occurred. The most important cultural resource is the people themselves.

The primary threat to the long-term viability of Beaufort County's Gullah/Geechee communities is land development. Implementing land use policies that concentrate growth in urban areas and protect rural land from suburban development, are the most important actions the County can take to protect its unique Gullah/Geechee heritage.

ST. HELENA STRATEGIES

- Reevaluate the CPO District by assessing whether additional land use restrictions are necessary to meet the intent of the district. Consider the addition of specific design standards that reinforce historic Gullah/Geechee development patterns and character. Include diverse representation on the steering committee that may be formed to guide the process. Ensure public input from all segments of the community.
- Explore the possibility of a Gullah/Geechee Heritage Enterprise Zone to allow cottage industries, and offer heritage tax credits for culturally significant businesses/industries.
- Explore tax credits and grants to help property owners in the CPO District fund housing restoration and adaptive reuse of commercial buildings.
- Explore the potential to base property tax assessment on the land's current use rather than its market value within the CPO District.

- Ensure open access to waterways for traditional Gullah/Geechee fishing families. Work in collaboration with the Open Land Trust and the Rural and Critical Land Program to place easements on these locations in perpetuity to enhance the cultural landscape, working waterfronts, and continuation of Gullah/Geechee traditions.
- Ensure that the Gullah/Geechee burial areas that were mapped in 1999, and any identified subsequently, are platted and protected from development. Consider exempting these properties from stormwater fee assessment and taxation where possible.
- Define the Corners Community as a hub of commerce and culture, and implement design guidelines and land conservation strategies to protect its character and create scenic buffers. Promote a safe pedestrian environment in the Corners Community and other gathering places on St. Helena Island that serve the Gullah/Geechee community.
- Encourage residents challenged by high utility bills to seek assistance through energy assistance programs administered by Beaufort-Jasper EOC.

ST. HELENA ACTIONS

- Reevaluate the CPO District by assessing whether additional land use restrictions are necessary to meet the intent of the district. Consider the addition of specific design standards that reinforce historic Gullah/Geechee development patterns and character. Include diverse representation on the steering committee that may be formed to guide the process. Ensure public input from all segments of the community.
- In partnership with the Sea Level Rise Task Force, commission a comprehensive water study and plan for St. Helena Island that considers stormwater, sea level rise, and

storm surge to better define the risks posed by climate change and new development and recommend strategies to protect against these threats. Engage the Gullah/Geechee community, Penn Center, local churches, area businesses, and local non-profits such as the Friends of Fort Fremont, in preparation of the plan. This study should be aligned with County-wide Gullah/Geechee cultural inventory and vulnerability assessments.

- Consider prohibiting Mining/Resource Extraction within the Cultural Protection Overlay zone and revising conditions for Mining in the CDC to require that the presence of Prime Farmland as defined by the USDA be considered in the decision to approve a permit for mining. Consider a spacing requirement for mines.
- Support nonprofit organizations, such as the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation and PAFEN, with expertise in resolving heirs' property issues. Encourage establishment of local offices in Northern Beaufort County and expansion of their programs throughout the County. Consider partnering with the municipalities to provide support for these groups by applying for grant funds, Accommodations Tax and Hospitality Tax Revenues (if appropriate), and local funds to expand efforts in the area.
- Work with DOT to address road and drainage conditions on state-owned roads on St. Helena Island.
- Ask residents to develop a specific list of areas (addresses) where drainage is an issue. Have these areas assessed by the Stormwater Utility Board and projects developed as appropriate to address concerns. Consider grant funding, including CDBG and EPA, for projects.
- Develop a strategy to permanently address maintenance and safety improvements to "legacy roads" and private roads serving low-and moderate-income property owners. Consider grant programs and public

service projects to address immediate maintenance needs

- Ensure that St. Helena residents are included in the planning process for the Parks and Recreation Master Plan. Consider equity issues in development of that plan.
- Assess the condition of existing recreation facilities on St. Helena Island. Develop plans for improvements and add funding costs to CIP. Apply for grant funding for improvements as appropriate.
- Review recreation programs on St. Helena Island. Ensure that programs are addressing community needs and that programs are expanded beyond pre-pandemic levels.
- Work with Penn Center to develop an MOU and lease agreement in order for the County to take a more active role in maintaining MLK Park on St. Helena Island and including applying for grants for park improvements.