

Storm threat raises ire at loss of TV coverage

BY NIKKI BEST
COASTAL OBSERVER

As the threat of Hurricane Irma looms, the Waccamaw Neck was suddenly limited in where residents can get their local information last week.

WBTW, the CBS affiliate in Myrtle Beach, went off the air in Georgetown County last week. There was no explanation, just the official comment from the station: "We have been informed that Charter/Spectrum has made the decision to drop WBTW's out-of-market carriage on its systems serving Murrells Inlet, Pawleys Island, Georgetown and Cheraw. We believe Spectrum made this decision because these communities are assigned by the Nielsen Company to the Charleston Designated Market Area and not the DMA that WBTW serves.

Therefore, despite WBTW's proximity to these communities, Spectrum carriage of WBTW is optional."

This means that Georgetown County is part of the Charleston DMA, which is unacceptable to many local residents. "Charleston basically seems to only care about Charleston," Laurel Muelhauser, an area resident, said. She reported the outage last week to Spectrum and to WBTW, and gave WSCS from Charleston a try. "First of all their weather isn't nearly as detailed as what WBTW does even for themselves. Because the Myrtle Beach station has what it's going to be like at the coast and what it's going to be like inland, which are significantly different."

The weather report is one of Muelhauser's big concerns. WSCS barely announces the current temperature

in Georgetown, let alone on the Waccamaw Neck, she said. "In an area where we can have such devastating weather, we need accurate local weather," Muelhauser said. "WBTW gives us projected temperatures for Litchfield, Murrells Inlet, Pawleys Island and Georgetown. They give us the details and they're right."

Besides knowing accurate weather for Waccamaw Neck, Muelhauser wants to know the local news. "The Charleston news is kind of interesting, but Myrtle Beach is my town," she said. "It's just a lot more germane and they occasionally cover a Waccamaw High football game or they mention something in Pawleys. Charleston never would."

There seems to be no easy solution to the problem. Over the last

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Charles Swenson/Coastal Observer

The county emergency director, Sam Hodge, faces television cameras before Hurricane Matthew in October 2016.

HURRICANE IRMA

Town will expand social media use after criticism in Matthew's wake

BY CHARLES SWENSON
COASTAL OBSERVER

Along with checking the forecast and ordering a U-Haul to evacuate Town Hall, the Pawleys Island administrator brushed up on his social media skills this week as Hurricane Irma made its way across the Atlantic as a Category 5 storm.

"One thing we will do differently is the message we convey over social media," Administrator Ryan Fabbri said. "If we have to close the causeways, we're going to be crystal clear about the method of getting back on."

The island was closed to residents and property owners for 36 hours after Hurricane Matthew passed over the Waccamaw Neck last October. Town officials wanted to give emergency workers time to clear hazards such as downed power lines and leaking propane tanks.

Whether Irma, which the National Weather Service expects to bring at least tropical storm conditions to the state early next week, or another storm, the town will improve its communications with owners and residents, Fabbri said. "We kind of got caught off guard last year. We underestimated the importance of that," he said.

Calls to Town Hall about Hurricane Irma increased on Wednesday after Gov. Henry McMaster declared a state of emergency. Although the National Hurricane Center said there was still disagreement among forecasters about the track of the storm, the declaration initiates a coordinated response from state agencies.

In Georgetown County, the emergency operations center was not activated, but it began sharing Facebook posts with storm-related information.

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Photos by Tanya Ackerman/Coastal Observer

Mary Schneider talks about sea turtles with spectators at a nest inventory. Below, she walks the beach looking for nests.

PAWLEYS ISLAND

Top citizen never misses a chance to teach about turtles

BY CHARLES SWENSON
COASTAL OBSERVER

Mary Schneider still remembers the first nest.

"That was at the north end, and that was such a thrill. So exciting," she said. In the 22 years since, she has trained others to find and protect the nests that sea turtles lay on Pawleys Island each summer. Her efforts led the Pawleys Island Civic Association to name her their Citizen of the Year.

"This plaque represents more than just one person," Schneider said. "There are about 50 names that should be here, too, because it's a group effort."

That would include her husband Phil, who shares the work of coordinating those volunteers, all members of S.C. United Turtle Enthusiasts, or SCUTE. "It's a responsibility that we take seriously," she said. "He does most of the computer work. There's a lot of reporting back to the Department of Natural Resources and seaturtle.org."

There were 24 nests laid on

Pawleys Island this year, the same as in 2016. The number of nests has climbed steadily this century, from an average of six a year to 13 a year during the period from 2007 through 2014. "Why? I have to give that credit to SCUTE," Schneider said.

The group was started in 1983

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MURRELLS INLET

Appeal seeks to reverse variance to allow deck over live oak roots

BY CHARLES SWENSON
COASTAL OBSERVER

A citizens group is challenging a variance that will allow a Murrells Inlet restaurant to build a deck over the roots of a live oak. Preserve Murrells Inlet and three area residents appealed to the Circuit Court last week to overturn the variance approved for the Costa Coastal Kitchen.

The Georgetown County Board of Zoning Appeals approved the variance to setback requirements in July, saying it wished to preserve the oak tree. Under the zoning ordinance, the restaurant could build a deck "at grade" without seeking a variance. That would smother the roots of the tree, said Jean Rothrock, a landscape architect and co-owner of Waccamaw Landscaping, who designed the project.

Members of Preserve Murrells Inlet told the appeals board they objected to the deck because it would set a precedent that would allow other restaurants along Business 17 to expand dining into their parking lots. Costa wants to create an outside waiting area for customers. Whether it can use the proposed deck for dining would depend on the amount of parking, according to Joanne Ochal, the county zoning administrator.

"I think saving the tree is very important," board member Truitt Owens said, moving to grant the variance. "I probably need some help on the criteria."

To get a variance, applicants must meet four criteria: their property has extraordinary conditions; nearby property doesn't have similar conditions; complying with the zoning code would unreasonably restrict the use of their property; and granting the



The restaurant owners want to put a waiting area under the oak. Residents fear it will lead to outside dining.

variance isn't a detriment to the public good.

In its published findings, the board said, "The placement of the tree and the restaurants (sic) current location unreasonable (sic) restrict future expansion of the business." Granting the variance for the deck "will allow a more eco-friendly environment for the existing tree. Also, the proposed deck would create a safer waiting area for customers."

In their appeal to the court, Preserve Murrells Inlet and three neighbors - Lynn Chrapek, Martha Smith and Margaret Ann May - argue just the opposite, "that the property has been effectively used as a restaurant for more

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SCHOOLS | Capital improvement plan

District will buy land next to Coastal Montessori campus

BY CHARLES SWENSON
COASTAL OBSERVER

While most of the Georgetown County School District's \$165 million capital project is going into bricks and mortar, it also plans to buy a commercial tract on Highway 17 next to the Coastal Montessori Charter School.

The 2.6 acres at the corner of Highway 17 and Barony Place is adjacent to the 6.9-acre charter school campus. The school bought the larger tract in 2014 for \$694,000 and completed construction of a building last fall.

The land purchase was the best use of the funds allocated for the charter school in a 2016 bond referendum, said Rob Horvath, who chairs the Coastal Montessori board.

"Hopefully, the district will give us a long lease at a low rate," he said.

Charter schools receive public funds, but are exempt from some

state regulations. Coastal Montessori is chartered by the county school district. The school is to receive a total of \$800,000 through the bond referendum.

The district has bought property for future use near other school sites, Superintendent Randy Dozier said. "It's probably a little more costly, but it's less than the going price," he said.

The district will pay \$380,000 or about \$146,000 an acre. Nearby property is selling for \$200,000 an acre, Dozier said.

The school has no immediate plans for the property. Its charter calls for 245 students in grades one through eight. It began an eighth-grade program this year. There are no plans for a high school, a concern raised by some residents when the school selected the site on Highway 17 at Old Plantation Drive.

The school may eventually want to build a gym, Horvath said.



Tanya Ackerman/Coastal Observer

Avery Ford, 6, and his dad Mike examine a molting chameleon under UV lights at the Coastal Montessori Charter School open house last week.

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