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50 cents

Politics raises profile of Murrells Inlet condo project

BY CHARLES SWENSON
COASTAL OBSERVER

Debate over a plan to build 58 condos in Murrells Inlet has a political twist as a candidate for Georgetown County Council says it shows the incumbent is out of touch and the incumbent counters that his challenger is uninformed.

But inlet residents who filled the community center for a meeting about the project this week said their concern is that growth continues to change character of the community. "I was born and raised in Murrells Inlet and this is not what Murrells Inlet is," said Tommy Ruffin.

The condos are planned for 5 acres between Murrells Inlet Road and Bypass 17 that was sold last month by the Belin Trust to a Myrtle Beach real estate firm. Bentley Thompson, owner of Native Homes, has submitted plans for 58 condos in four buildings and two single-family lots on the property. It is up for review next week by the Planning Commission.

The property was once Georgetown County's designated spoils site for inlet dredging projects.

The property is zoned "general residential" which allows multi-family development. The county sent out notices of the

project last week to neighboring property owners. Georgetown County requires review of the project by the commission and County Council to show that it meets the development regulations.

"There has been a lot of misinformation put out," County Council Member John Thomas said. "Bill Hills has gone to great effort to stir up people's fears and anxieties."

Hills is running for the Council District 1 seat Thomas now holds. He said the Murrells Inlet area, where he lives, needs better representation. Thomas lives in North Litchfield. "He's willing to
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Tanya Ackerman/Coastal Observer

Bill Hills, left, tells John Thomas and Boyd Johnson that the project will have to use Murrells Inlet Road.

HIGHWAY

Safety target for region's road work raises doubts

BY CHARLES SWENSON
COASTAL OBSERVER

The group that plans the region's road projects has set a goal of reducing traffic deaths and injuries. But the process of applying a new federal metric for safety left members wondering why the lower target would actually result in about five more fatalities.

The average number of annual traffic fatalities in the area covered by the Grand Strand Area Transportation Study was 50.2 from 2012 to 2016. The study's policy committee of state and local officials was asked by the state Department of Transportation to adopt a target for 54.7 annual fatalities for the coming year.

Those targets are required by the Federal Highway Administration.

"I thought our target was zero," said state Sen. Stephen Goldfinch, who chairs the GSATS policy committee.

The state developed the target by looking at the five-year trend "and selected numbers that fit into our profile," said Mark Hoeweler, the senior staff member for GSATS. The deadline for the state to adopt them is the end of February.

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Musical interludes

Georgia Almonte, 15, and Lessa Bagwell, 16, meet cellist Zuill Bailey after a performance at Waccamaw High sponsored by the Pawleys Island Festival of Music and art. Bailey, left, and Matt Beilis, right, who performed this week at Waccamaw Middle, were part of the Minton Series, named for the festival's late founder.

Photos by Tanya Ackerman/
Coastal Observer



ZONING

Board denies McDonald's a variance for flat roof

BY CHARLES SWENSON
COASTAL OBSERVER

A planned renovation of the McDonald's restaurant at Pawleys Island will take longer now that the owner has to design a pitched roof for the building. But Brad Valdes, the franchise owner, said he understands.

"I completely understand. I love Pawleys Island," he told the Georgetown County Board of Zoning Appeals after its unanimous vote last week to deny a variance for a flat roof.

The restaurant was built in 1999, before the county adopted a design code for commercial buildings in the Highway 17 corridor on Waccamaw Neck. That code now requires buildings to have roofs with at least a 6-12 pitch. A flat roof can be used over a portion of the building as long as it isn't visible from the highway.

Valdes plans a \$700,000 renovation of the \$851,800 restaurant, more than the threshold for bringing the building into compliance.

But the architect for the project, Kyle Woudstra, told the appeals board that it will be hard to comply because of the way the original building was designed. "If this was a new building, we'd have a different conversation," he said.

He said the majority of the cost of the renovation will be spent on the interior of the building. The restaurant got a variance last year to the county parking requirements so it could remove some spaces in order to expand

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EDUCATION | Safe and Sound Schools

Mother of shooting victim says communities matter

BY EMILY TOPPER
COASTAL OBSERVER

For Michele Gay, making schools safer is a community effort. And, she says, it's tangible.

"I want people to walk away with a sense of empowerment and control over the safety of their own school and community," Gay said. "What we are hearing is just this feeling of helplessness,

like there's nothing people can do to turn the tide. It's heart-breaking. That's what we're aiming to change."

Gay is the co-founder and executive director of Safe and Sound Schools: A Sandy Hook Initiative. The program, which Gay will present today at Waccamaw High, was started to spark a national conversation about school safety and preparing

schools for the unthinkable.

Gay has lived that conversation firsthand. Her daughter, Josephine, was one of 19 children and six teachers killed in the Sandy Hook school massacre in 2012. Her Thursday event will follow her personal experiences and the lessons learned since.

"I still wake up every morning and have to walk my way through the fact that it happened," she

said. "Much less that it happened in our sleepy little town with high test scores and no crime. We start by making it personal, we walk through the experience with them and how the unthinkable was able to happen. Making it personal for folks is something that is eye-opening."

The goal of the initiative, Gay said, is to get community
SEE "SAFETY," PAGE 9

PAWLEYS ISLAND | Rising waters

Panel hopes to attract state aid for roads and drainage

BY CHARLES SWENSON
COASTAL OBSERVER

Pawleys Island residents know they can't hold back the rain and tide, but they would at least like to get the sand out of the storm drains.

"To truly solve these problems, this is what we need to do," said Town Administrator Ryan Fabbri at the inaugural meeting of a committee that will look at flooding and road issues in the town.

While acknowledging that living on a barrier island means living with tides, Mayor Jimmy Braswell said "we've had major flooding problems and they seem to do nothing but get worse."

Water no longer drains after the highest tides, sometimes called king tides, or after heavy rains. After a storm last weekend,



Charles Swenson/Coastal Observer

Water covers the road in front of Town Hall after the "1,000-year flood" in 2015. The building itself was flooded the next year.

"there was not a 100-foot section of any road on Pawleys that didn't have major puddles," Braswell said.

Fabbri is still waiting for DOT to make good on a promise to remove sand from Springs Avenue on the south end of the island. It was cleaned once after Hurricane Irma last fall. "It's going to be an on-going problem," he said.

He was also promised that drains on a section of Myrtle Avenue just below the Nature Park would be cleaned. That hasn't happened either, Fabbri said, in

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The Bard of Winyah: Festival shows Shakespeare's work hasn't lost its power over 500 years.

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Education: It's still bowl season for school academic teams.

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