

## THE COALITION FOR SMART GROWTH\*

### Comments on the Northern Regional Plan Population Growth Projections

Beaufort County's Northern Regional Plan seriously underestimates likely future infrastructure costs for several reasons. One problem is that the plan omits some provisions for future needs, e.g. fire stations and schools. Moreover, the Plan's population growth projection is far below recent experience and likely future growth.

Taking historical growth for the period 1980-2000, the plan assumes an annual future growth rate of about 1.5%. This figure is much lower than the actual rate of population growth in the area during the past fifteen years. Between 1990 and 2000, the population of Northern Beaufort County grew by 2% per year. From 2000 to 2005, the estimated growth rate accelerated to over 2.9% per year. Data from the County Planning Department show that the number of dwelling units in Northern Beaufort County grew at an annual rate of 2.9% between 2000 and 2005. We can reasonably assume that population grew at a similar rate. In the town of Port Royal, the Sheldon area, Lady's Island and St. Helena, the annual growth rates were over six percent. (Table 1)

The lower population growth rate of the 1980's is unlikely to return. While we are currently undergoing a downturn in the housing cycle, there is no reason to think that this is a permanent shift. Indeed, demographics argue that the future will bring even higher rates of population growth. For the next ten years, US Population growth for the over-64 age group is projected to be more than three times that from 1995-2005. (Table 2) It is not unreasonable to expect that the pressure for real estate development in Northern Beaufort County will increase proportionately. As the Hilton Head-Bluffton-Hardeeville axis saturates, more growth pressures will spill over north of the Broad.

Taking these factors into account, a reasonable population growth rate projection for Northern Beaufort County would be 2.5 or 3 percent. By using the historically low rate of 1.5% the planners are only factoring in a total population growth of 35% between 2005 and 2025. Transportation impacts and infrastructure costs based on this projection are significantly underestimated. If we project a still conservative population growth rate of 2.5%, the increase in population and its costs is 64% rather than 35%, or 1.8 times greater than the estimate used by the Plan. If we project a population growth rate of 3%, which is close to current growth rates, the total increment in population will be 81%, which is more than double the projection used in the plan. (Table 3)

**Table 1-  
Number of Dwelling Units in Northern Beaufort County**

	2000	2005	Annual growth rate
City of Beaufort	5,564	5,780	0.8%
Town of Port Royal	1,745	2,377	6.4%
Sheldon Area	1,524	2,129	6.9%
Port Royal Island (uninc.)	10,616	10,825	0.4%
Lady's Island	3,585	4,836	6.2%
St. Helena Island	3,648	4,871	6.0%
Total	26,682	30,818	2.9%

Source: LIBPA Newsletter March 2007, citing analysis of Ms. Teri Norris of Beaufort County Planning Dept.

**Table 2-Population Growth Rates & Projections**

	1995-2005	2007-2017
USA	11.4%	8.9%
USA-Over age 64	9.4%	31.0%
South Carolina	13.3%	
Beaufort County	31.7%	

Source: US Bureau of the Census.

**Table 3-Beaufort County Northern Regional Plan Population Projections**

<i>Projections to 2025</i>	<i>Plan assumes:</i>	<i>Reasonable alternative projections:</i>			
Annual growth rate	1.53%	2.00%	2.50%	3.00%	3.50%
Total % growth '05-'25	35%	49%	64%	81%	99%
Population in 2025	109,143	119,794	132,102	145,605	160,413
Ratio to Plan growth assumption	1.00	1.37	1.80	2.28	2.80

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