

**BEAUFORT COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA
RURAL & CRITICAL LANDS PRESERVATION PROGRAM (RCLP)
2016 COMMUNITY SURVEY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

BACKGROUND

Over the last couple of decades, Beaufort County has been engaged in a robust process to acquire unique rural and critical lands. The next phase in this process involves support of these properties with plans and strategies that sustain their natural and cultural value, while also understanding the options for community use given the properties’ strategic advantage. To ensure that plans are developed with the benefit of the community’s knowledge and general desires, county officials enlisted the assistance of researchers affiliated with the Master of Public Administration Program within Clemson University’s Parks, Recreation & Tourism Management Department to conduct an assessment of community sentiments about the importance and potential use of these properties.

The survey is intended to inform Beaufort County of the public opinions regarding the RCLP program objectives, suggested strategies for implementation of passive park use and maintenance, and consideration of potential funding mechanisms to preserve the integrity and longevity of acquired lands.

Out of Beaufort County’s 175,852 residents, there were 648 survey participants, well above the 348 responses needed to represent a statistically significant sample.

SURVEY RESULTS

Awareness of Rural & Critical Lands Preservation Program (RCLP)

The majority of respondents (86.6%) are aware of the RCLP program while less than 14% of respondents are not aware of the program.

Accessibility & Protection of Passive Parks

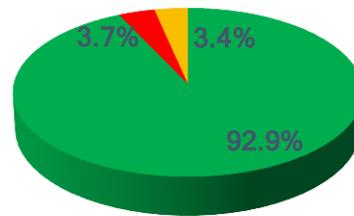
While over 86% of respondents believe these lands should be more accessible to the public, 7.9% do not know if they should be and 5.8 % do not think these properties should be more accessible.

When asked if the conservation lands should be protected while they are made more accessible, 93% of respondents agreed, showing strong sentiments for conservation and protection, balanced with greater accessibility.

Nature Conservation & Quality of Life

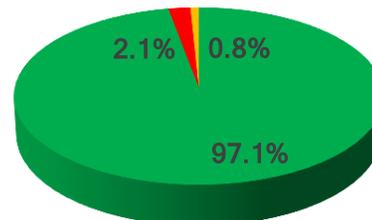
Over 97% of participants agreed that community natural and conservation areas are personally important to them and that these public spaces have a positive impact on their overall quality of life.

These properties should remain protected & made more accessible



■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Do not know

I value natural/conservation areas & they are important to my quality of life



■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Do not know

Activities

When asked to check all of the passive activities they might participate in on these lands, the top responses were nature based with a focus on enjoying vegetation, wildlife, and scenery. To a lesser extent, the methods of experiencing these attributes were considered, including kayaking and canoeing, walking, running, and biking.

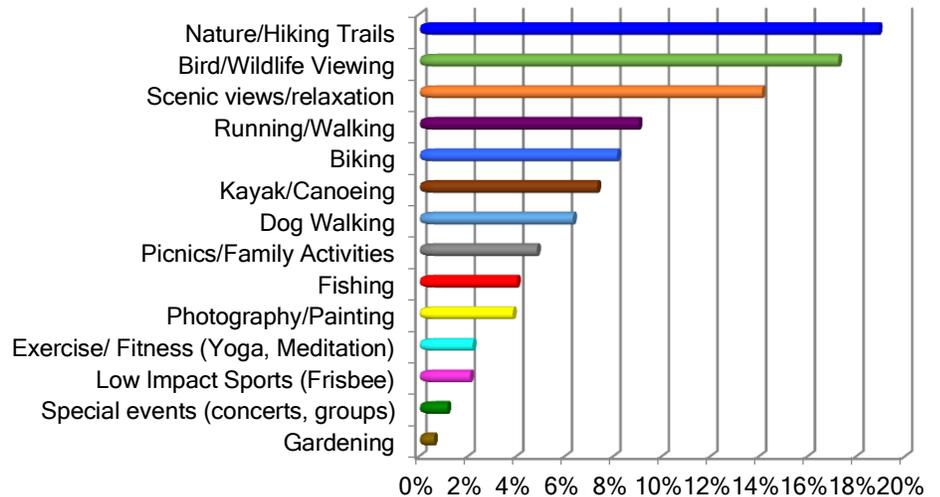
Next, respondents were asked to prioritize their top three preferred activities as indicated in the adjacent chart. Similar to the non-ranked activities of interest, hiking and nature trails, wildlife viewing, scenic views and relaxation, running, walking, and biking received the strongest prioritization.

Access & Facilities

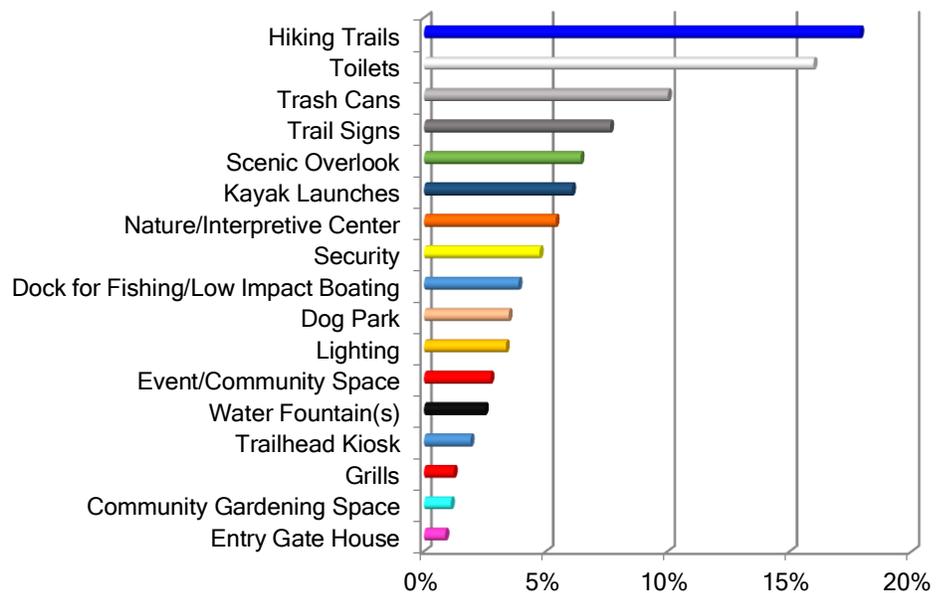
While accessibility or being able to visit conservation lands is important to survey participants, travel to the sites is acceptable to the majority of respondents. Almost 84% of respondents are willing to travel over three miles to visit a passive park.

Once at the parks, respondents were asked to check all improvements that they would like in these public spaces. They emphasized basic needs and among other things, access to toilet facilities, hiking trails, and trashcans. When respondents were asked to prioritize their top three preferred amenities at passive parks, hiking trails, bathrooms, and trashcans rose to the top of the list as depicted in the adjacent chart. Generally, these amenities are in line with the non-prioritized general preferences identified above.

Of these activities, what are the top 3 that you would consider participating in at one of the passive parks?



Of these improvements, what are your top 3 priorities?



Economic Prosperity & Quality of Life

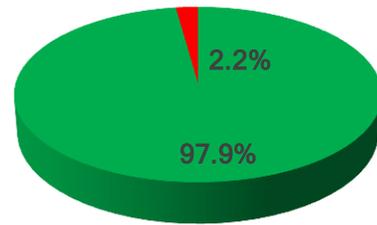
In rapidly growing communities, maintained and accessible conservation and preservation areas often enhance residents’ quality of life. At the same time, they are an attraction for tourists and visitors. The majority of survey respondents (65.1%) believe that the RCLP lands will contribute a great deal to the County’s economic prosperity. Over a quarter (26.4%) of survey participants believe that these lands somewhat contribute to the County’s prosperity and fewer than 10% of respondents believe these lands do not contribute much or at all to community economic prosperity.

Relative to the contribution of these conservation areas to Beaufort County’s overall quality of life, an overwhelming majority (83%) believe these areas will contribute a great deal to residents’ overall quality of life.

Protection, Improvement & Willingness to Pay

One of the survey’s objectives is to understand the value of the county’s conservation efforts to the community. Representing the highest level of commitment in the entire survey, approximately 98% of respondents affirmed the importance of ensuring that these properties are protected, maintained, and improved.

How important is it to you to protect, maintain, & improve these passive park properties?



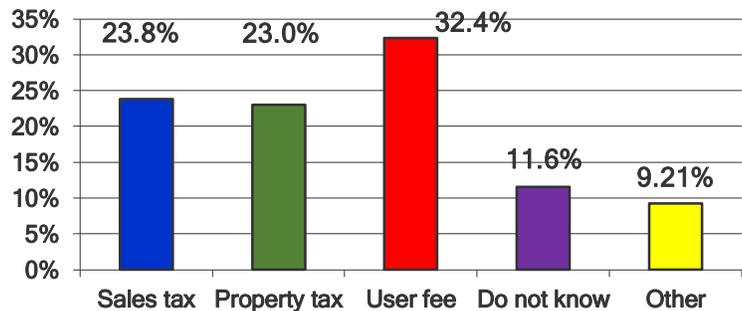
■ Important ■ Not Important

Protection, improvement, and maintenance of the County’s passive lands require different degrees of resource commitment depending on the particular property, the location, and the native or cultural attributes. Understanding community sentiments relative to the funding of operational improvements and maintenance are important as the county’s RCLP program moves forward. In the next question, respondents were asked to check all of the funding sources that they believe should be enlisted. Responses are based on the number of responses. As illustrated in the following chart, approximately 47% of the responses indicated that sales (23.8%) or property taxes (23%) should be employed. Another 32.4% identified user fees as a potential funding source, 11.6% indicated they did not know, and approximately 10% had another or alternate response.

Of the other responses, approximately 1/3 suggested that monies should come from existing funds including taxes, existing budgets, and property acquisition monies. Another approximate 1/3 of responses included accommodation and hospitality taxes, real estate transaction fees, lottery proceeds, and bonds as ideas.

Regarding user fees, over 50% of respondents indicated they are willing to pay a fee between \$1 and \$4 per passive park visit. Over one-quarter (28%) of respondents indicated they did not know what they would be willing to pay.

How should the county pay for operations/ maintenance of passive parks? Check applicable.



Additional Participant Suggestions

Survey participants were asked if they had additional ideas for the use of Beaufort

County's passive parks. The most frequent suggestions not already addressed in the general questions included:

- Limit hardscapes and infrastructure and provide connectivity to and from urban areas:
- Provide benches, ongoing maintenance, and security:
- Passive lands should be minimally touched by human intrusion or improvement:
- To contain costs, consider new home impact fees, a volunteer corps to handle maintenance, and keep conservation properties in private ownership:
- Contrary to the passive park definition and policies: racquet sports, target practice and hunting, drone and model airplane fields, playgrounds and sports fields were suggested as uses;
- Some uses were suggested that might be accommodated, depending on compatibility with a specific area's natural or cultural values, including equestrian trails, exercise stations, primitive camping, and outdoor classrooms.

All uses need careful consideration based on the particular area, numbers of people participating in activities, amount of parking or additional infrastructure required to accommodate the use and users, amount of soil or vegetation compaction anticipated, risk level and liability, and anticipated service or maintenance needs.

CONCLUSIONS & INSIGHTS

In general, survey results provide clear preferences for the types of uses and activities that County residents are interested in for these public spaces. There is a strong directive to uphold the natural and/or cultural value and sanctity of these lands. At the same time, there is support for complimentary activity as long as it does not detract from or diminish the property's inherent value or the mission and purpose of the RCLP program.

This survey provides the momentum for ongoing discussion with the community on how to best use and maintain these public spaces. Because of the importance of these lands to citizens' quality of life and economic prosperity, informed design and management techniques are necessary. Responses indicate support for building a successful program that engages the public during the planning stages of conservation area design. Along these lines, citizen engagement should include transparency in project planning and development, additional educational efforts that include information about acquisition criteria, project funding mechanisms, and further exploration of the needs and ideas of the community in a way that corresponds with community values and wellbeing.

Beaufort County continues to lead the way in the planning and land conservation realm. Moving forward, engaged citizens along with well planned conservation methods and management practices will sustain the county's unique resources and provide opportunity for long-term benefit to the people and future of Beaufort County.

