

## **Delay of game: Panel puts sports park on hold !**

**Key issue is uncertainty of funding for tournament facility in Northeast Richland**

By **DAWN HINSHAW** - [dhinshaw@thestate.com](mailto:dhinshaw@thestate.com)

A plan to build a world-class tournament park in Northeast Richland, SC has been set aside, raising questions about whether the county has the money — or the commitment — to start construction.

The county bought the 206-acre tract at Farrow and Hard Scrabble roads nearly three years ago. But Tuesday, when it finally came time to move forward on design work, a council committee sat on it.

"I'm afraid we're going to fritter this money away," Councilwoman Val Hutchinson said later, referring to the \$12.4 million set aside for high-impact, tourism-related projects such as the park.

### \* **Restaurant taxes down:**

On July 1, the restaurant tax in unincorporated areas of Richland County goes to 1 cent on the dollar; it had been 2 cents on the dollar. What does that mean to county revenues?

- This year, the county is on pace to collect \$4.8 million from the 2-cent on the dollar restaurant tax.
- The cut to 1 cent on the dollar, and fewer people eating out, mean an estimated \$2,165,000 in restaurant-tax revenues in the coming year.
- The county has annual commitments of \$3.5 million — meaning it already was planning to dip into a \$12.4 million reserve fund. At a budget session this week, members approved \$2 million more in requests from reserves.
- Why did the county temporarily cut the tax? To give taxpayers a break, after imposing a transit fee on cars to pay for bus service.

Later, in fact, in a budget meeting, council shelled out between \$2 million and \$3 million of that money, much of it for festivals.

In an area where demand for family-style recreation is high, the park was viewed as a way to attract out-of-town teams that would spend a few days at tournaments, boosting business at Northeast hotels and restaurants.

But several issues seem to be at play in the slow pace of the park, not the least of which is the council's decision to cut in half the amount of money the county will be collecting from a local tax on restaurant meals next year. The cut, to a penny on the dollar, goes into effect July 1.

That, on top of the public's decision to eat out less, means the county is counting on just \$2,165,000 in restaurant tax revenues in the coming year, less than half of this year's collections.



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It's the restaurant tax — which must be used for projects to attract tourists — that the county would use to build the park, envisioned as a place for swim meets and baseball, soccer and tennis tournaments. The last estimates, made nearly two years ago, place construction at \$33.5 million.

"Right now, I don't think we have the money to build it or put the employees in it," Councilman Bill Malinowski said after the committee's vote to defer. Other factors also appeared to play a role in the delay.

Councilman Norman Jackson fought for a park in Lower Richland, only to be turned down by his colleagues twice in six months.

He said one argument he heard was that the county doesn't need more parks — so he won't support one in the Northeast. "If you can't support Lower Richland," he said he told colleagues Tuesday, "I can't support Northeast."

But Gwendolyn Davis Kennedy, who disagreed with the committee's decision to defer, said members ought to pull together on this one.

"Everybody is looking at what they're getting instead of the overall picture — or what they haven't got," Kennedy said. New Councilman Jim Manning said the council is trying to do too many things at once and is overwhelmed with unfinished business.

But longtime Councilman Greg Pearce said the problem with the Northeast park is that no one seems to be taking ownership. "If we don't as a group get committed, it could be another two years" before something happens, he said.

While the park primarily would serve as a draw for regional tournaments, time during the week would be allotted for local recreational teams in desperate need of practice space in the growing Northeast area.

"There's tremendous demand, particularly for soccer but also for baseball," said Bill Spillane, president of the Dentsville Youth Baseball and Softball League. "We have two or three teams competing for fields each night for practice."

Northeast resident Barbara Wyatt said she hasn't been hearing any chatter about the vacant park land, probably because people don't want to ask for anything that might cost them more.

But, she added: "It's been promised, and it's long overdue to fulfill that promise."

The county paid \$7 million for the property, and Pearce said it's time to build something to draw tourists to the area. "We have money invested in dirt," he said, "and we need to turn that dirt back into money."

