



Town of Hilton Head Island

Gullah Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force Meeting

Monday, June 2, 2025, 1:00 PM
1 Town Center Court, Hilton Head Island, SC
Benjamin M. Racusin Council Chambers

The meeting can be viewed on the [Town's YouTube Channel](#), the [Beaufort County Channel](#), and Spectrum Channel 1304.

1. **Call to Order**
2. **Adoption of the Agenda**
3. **Approval of the Minutes**
 - a. Regular Meeting Minutes of January 6, 2025.
 - b. Regular Meeting Minutes of February 3, 2025.
4. **Staff Report**
 - a. Historic Neighborhood Permitting & Design Studio Report – Sharonica Stewart, Principal Planner Historic Neighborhoods
 - b. Home Safety and Repair Program Update – Sharonica Stewart, Principal Planner Historic Neighborhoods
 - c. Sewer Connection Program Update – Sharonica Stewart, Principal Planner Historic Neighborhoods
 - d. Gullah Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force Recommendations Update – Sharonica Stewart, Principal Planner Historic Neighborhoods
5. **Discussion Items**
6. **Public Comment - Non Agenda Items**
7. **Adjournment**

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Municipal Association of South Carolina (MASC) Civility Pledge:

"I pledge to build a stronger and more prosperous community by advocating for civil engagement, respecting others and their viewpoints, and finding solutions for the betterment of my city or town."



Town of Hilton Head Island GULLAH GEECHEE LAND AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION TASK FORCE MEETING Monday, January 6, 2025, 1:00 PM Minutes

1. Call to Order

Chairman Stevens called the meeting to order at 1:00 p.m. Present were: Chairman Stevens, Vice Chairman Simmons, Mr. Campbell, Ms. Wright and Mr. Abdul-Malik. Mr. Henz and Ms. Green were excused.

2. Adoption of the Agenda

Mr. Abdul-Malik moved to approve the Agenda as presented. Mr. Campbell seconded. The Agenda was unanimously approved.

3. Approval of the Minutes

a. Regular Meeting Minutes of November 4, 2024

Mr. Simmons moved to approve the meeting minutes of November 4, 2024. Ms. Wright seconded. The meeting minutes of November 4, 2024 were unanimously approved.

4. Staff Report

a. General Staff Updates - LMO/Districts - Shea Farrar, Principal Planner

Shea Farrar, Principal Planner, shared exciting updates regarding the upcoming District meetings, which are set to begin next week. Invitations will be sent via email to key stakeholders, along with a survey link that will go live concurrently with the first meeting.

The meetings will engage both the Planning Commission and the Task Force, ensuring a collaborative approach. Once the email communication has been finalized and approved, it will be distributed accordingly. Coordination with the Task Force will also take place to facilitate their involvement in the meetings.

Additionally, the Priority Amendments are scheduled for an introduction at the Planning Commission meeting in January, followed by a Public Hearing in February. Significant progress continues on the comprehensive LMO overhaul, with ongoing efforts behind the scenes.

b. Historic Neighborhood Permitting & Design Studio Report - Sharonica Gavin, Principal Planner Historic Neighborhoods

Sharonica Gavin, Principal Planner Historic Neighborhoods, stated that the mission of this program is to support property owners and residents in historic neighborhoods with a range of services. These include assistance with property development permits, family

compounds, family subdivisions, conceptual site design, addressing, property access, business licenses, and connections to additional resources such as heirs' property, property taxes, and business development.

Since the Task Force's last meeting on November 4, 2024, four new requests have been received. These requests involve guidance on heirs' property, zoning allowances, and property development.

The program, which was launched in October 2021, has received a total of 95 Design Studio requests as of December, 2024. Of these, 67 have been completed, 20 are active, and 8 have been either withdrawn or marked as inactive.

Vice Chairman Simmons questioned whether to comply with the design guidelines for family compound, the property must have been owned by the family since 1956. When asked whether a newly acquired property would qualify under the current standards, Ms. Gavin clarified that, as of now, properties not owned by the family prior to 1956 would not meet the qualifications for family compound. Ms. Gavin stated that this issue can be brought up during our discussions on the LMO Overhaul.

Ms. Wright asked whether funding is carried over from year to year in the Design Studio and confirmed there is no funding from the Town. Ms. Gavin stated there are no grants, but we do have a partnership with Low Country Gullah Foundation to assist with issues that do arise within the Historic Neighborhoods Permitting and Design Studio.

c. Home Safety and Repair Program Update - Sharonica Gavin, Principal Planner
Historic Neighborhoods

Ms. Gavin, stated that as of the Task Force's meeting on November 4, 2024, we have received additional Home Safety and Repair applications.

The program launched in July 2022, has received a total of 147 applications as of December 2024. Of these, 113 were submitted as complete applications, while approximately 19 remain incomplete, pending additional information. Efforts are underway to contact the families associated with the incomplete applications to inform them of the missing requirements. Ms. Gavin emphasized her availability as a direct resource to assist applicants with any questions or concerns.

Of the 113 completed applications, 72 projects have been successfully completed, and 34 are currently under contract and permitted. However, Ms. Gavin noted that the program currently lacks additional funding to support future projects. She highlighted her ongoing efforts to identify new funding sources to sustain the program.

In May 2024, the program received an allocation of approximately \$900,000. By July, the program was restructured to ensure that the American Rescue Plan Act Funds could be fully encumbered before the December 31st deadline. This restructuring was successful, and all funds were utilized as planned. Notably, 90-95% of the projects funded through

the program are located within Historic Neighborhoods.

A robust discussion followed regarding potential funding sources and strategies to secure additional financial support for the program. Ms. Gavin shared her plans to collaborate with the Town's Grant Administrator to explore new funding opportunities. Additionally, she has reached out to the Beaufort Jasper Housing Trust to access the availability of resources that could support the program's continued operation.

Vice Chair Simmons stated he would like to see the Town take some ownership in this program.

Ms. Gavin stated she would report back to the Task Force with a breakdown of all the funds from the inception of the program to date to see where funding came from - both Home Safety Repair and Sewer Connection.

A Community member expressed their gratitude to Ms. Gavin for her personal assistance and her contributions to the Community. Ms. Wright emphasized the importance of community members who have benefited from this program attending meetings to share their experiences. She noted that having their testimonials on record would highlight the program's significance and its positive impact on families.

d. Sewer Connection Program Update - Sharonica Gavin, Principal Planner Historic Neighborhoods

Ms. Gavin stated we have received 48 applications - 32 of these have been completed and we currently have four jobs under contract as of now. We were awarded approximately \$70,000 earlier this year. That funding has all been expended at this time. We will be looking for funding for the Lateral Sewer Connection Program.

e. Gullah Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force 16 Priority Recommendations Update - Sharonica Gavin, Principal Planner Historic Neighborhoods

Ms. Gavin stated the Gullah Geechee Cultural Preservation Project is dedicated to preserving and celebrating the unique heritage of the Gullah Geechee community on Hilton Head Island. This initiative employs strategic approaches to address cultural preservation, public policy, and heirs' property issues. The report presents 36 recommendations, of which 16 are prioritized for immediate action in alignment with the Town Council's 2023-2025 Strategic Action Plan. To date, more than 60% of the priority recommendations have been successfully implemented, with the remaining recommendations actively progressing or under pursuit.

f. Gullah Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force 2025 Priorities - Sharonica Gavin, Principal Planner Historic Neighborhoods

Ms. Gavin reviewed the Gullah Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force

2025 Priorities as included in their Agenda Packet.

Public Policies

- Historic Overlay District - this effort will be addressed through Town district planning and LMO Overhaul Project efforts.
- Historic Neighborhoods - Gullah Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force will be a key reviewer of plans and negotiations within historic neighborhoods.
- Family Subdivision/Family Compound - Regulation refinement will be completed as part of the LMO Overhaul Project.
- Workforce Housing - Housing initiatives will be prioritized and managed through the Town's Chief Housing Officer.
- Internal Coordination - Coordinate with Gullah Geechee Community Development Corporation Executive Director to determine overlap with the Gullah Geechee Land and Cultural Task Force workplan.

Cultural Preservation

- Gullah History and Cultural Awareness Program - the curriculum was approved in late 2022. For 2025, staff will implement the remaining video segment of this recommendation by coordinating with the Town's Community Engagement Division.

Refining Recommendations: Continued Efforts

- Historic Neighborhood Permitting & Design Studio.
- Family Subdivision and Family Compound implementation.
- Heirs' property support for property owners and regional coordination.
- Delinquent Tax Support Program.

5. Discussion Items

a. Approval of Proposed 2025 Meeting Dates

Mr. Abdul-Malik moved to approve the 2025 Meeting Dates. Vice Chairman Simmons seconded. Ms. Wright expressed the opinion that monthly meetings were unnecessary. The 2025 Meeting Dates were subsequently approved by a vote of 4-1, with Ms. Wright voting in opposition.

6. Public Comment - Non Agenda items

7. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 2:20 p.m.

APPROVED: _____

The recording of this Meeting can be found on the Town's website at www.hiltonheadislandsc.gov



Town of Hilton Head Island GULLAH GEECHEE LAND AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION TASK FORCE MEETING Monday, February 3, 2025, 1:00 PM Minutes

1. Call to Order

Chairman Stevens called the meeting to order at 1:00 p.m. Present were: Chairman Stevens, Vice Chairman Simmons, Mr. Henz and Mr. Abdul-Malik. Ms. Green, Mr. Campbell and Ms. Wright were excused.

2. Adoption of the Agenda

Mr. Henz moved to approve the Agenda as presented. Vice Chairman Simmons seconded. The Agenda was unanimously approved.

3. Approval of the Minutes

a. Regular Meeting Minutes of January 6, 2025

The meeting minutes of January 6, 2025 were not approved as there was not a quorum of members present at that meeting. They will be presented for approval at the March 3, 2025 Meeting.

4. Staff Report

a. Introduction to Land Management Ordinance Priority Amendments to include Workforce Housing Density Bonus, Single-Family Home and Commercial Mass & Scale, Subdivision Regulations, Adaptive Re-Use of Existing Hotels & Motels, Major Subdivision & Development Plan Review Process, Transportation Impact Analysis Plan, Common Open Space, Tree Protection, Sign Regulations, and Construction Management Standards - Missy Luick, Director of Planning

Missy Luick, Director of Planning, noted that there are several Priority Amendments to review and introduce with the Task Force today. As part of the Land Management Ordinance (LMO) Amendment Project, the Task Force is one of the key bodies involved in reviewing the Code as updates unfold.

The broader Priority Amendments Project is a key initiative within the Town's Strategic Action Plan and is being implemented under the Growth Management Strategy. The LMO Amendment Project consists of two primary components: the comprehensive LMO Overhaul and the LMO Priority Amendments. The Priority Amendments focus on incremental changes that address critical and time-sensitive issues that cannot wait for the full overhaul. These amendments provide immediate, effective solutions to pressing community development challenges while minimizing unintended consequences. More complex issues requiring additional research and analysis will be considered as part of

the full LMO Overhaul.

To date, several amendments have already been adopted within the Priority Amendments framework. In 2023, three phases of amendments were implemented, followed by an additional amendment in 2024 related to floor area ratio. In September 2024, ten amendment topics were reviewed by Town Council during a Workshop. These same topics will be discussed with the Task Force today. We are hosting a Public Hearing on these Amendments with the Planning Commission on February 19th. These Amendments are for introduction, review and your feedback.

Ms. Luick reviewed the 10 Priority Amendments with the Task Force, as follows:

- 1) Workforce Housing Density Bonus
- 2) Single-Family Home & Commercial Mass & Scale
- 3) Subdivision Regulations
- 4) Adaptive Re-Use of Existing Hotels & Motels
- 5) Major Subdivision & Development Plan Review Process
- 6) Transportation Impact Analysis Plan
- 7) Common Open Space
- 8) Tree Protection
- 9) Sign-Regulations
- 10) Construction Management Standards

Ms. Luick answered questions and concerns from the Task Force and indicated that if the Task Force has additional comments or questions after this meeting, please email staff so that we can incorporate those as we bring these Amendments through to completion. Chairman Stevens and the Task Force thanked Ms. Luick for her report.

b. Historic Neighborhood Permitting & Design Studio Report - Sharonica Stewart, Principal Planner Historic Neighborhoods

Sharonica Stewart, Principal Planner for Historic Neighborhoods, informed the Task Force that two new requests were received during this reporting period. Staff provided guidance to applicants on zoning regulations, land use considerations, and pathways for property development. Additionally, staff continued to collaborate with applicants to ensure their projects align with established guidelines while preserving historical and cultural integrity.

To date, a total of 97 Design Studio requests have been received. Of these, 67 have been completed, 22 remain active, and 8 have either been withdrawn or become inactive.

c. Home Safety and Repair Program Update - Sharonica Stewart, Principal Planner Historic Neighborhoods

Sharonic Stewart, Principal Planner for Historic Neighborhoods, informed the Task Force that over the past 30 days, eight projects have been successfully completed, positively impacting eight families within our community. The program teams remain committed to

finalizing the remaining contracted projects while actively exploring additional funding opportunities.

Since the program's inception in July 2022 through January 2025, a total of 147 applications have been received. Of these, 113 were fully completed applications, resulting in 82 permitted projects being successfully completed, 26 currently under contract, and seven awaiting additional program funding. Additionally, applicants who were not eligible for this program have been referred to other available resources for assistance.

d. Sewer Connection Program Update - Sharonica Stewart, Principal Planner Historic Neighborhoods

Sharonic Stewart, Principal Planner for Historic Neighborhoods, informed the Task Force that 32 sewer connections have been successfully completed to date. Town staff continues to collaborate closely with the Hilton Head Island Public Service District to complete the remaining projects, ensuring that more residents gain access to essential sewer services.

To date, 48 applications have been received, with 32 projects completed, four currently under contract, and five awaiting additional funding.

As previously mentioned in the last meeting, staff remains committed to identifying additional funding opportunities for these programs. I have shared details regarding program funding via email and would like to provide further insight into our ongoing efforts. At this time, I would like to invite Missy Luick to speak further on this topic.

Missy Luick advised that our current program is funded through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Following last month's Task Force Meeting, Sharonica shared the total allocations for both the Home Safety and Repair Program and the Sewer Connection Program. Notably, the Home Safety and Repair Program received an award of just under \$1.5 million, while the Lateral Sewer Program was allocated \$369,000. The data reflects the significant number of community members who have applied for and received assistance through these programs, demonstrating their substantial impact on improving residents' quality of life.

Recognizing the importance of these initiatives, we have been actively exploring additional funding sources to sustain them beyond the exhaustion of ARPA funds, which have been fully encumbered through the end of calendar year 2024. Potential funding sources under consideration include the Beaufort Jasper Housing Trust, Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), South Carolina Housing, and other grant opportunities. Since these programs were originally established by Town Council with ARPA as the designated funding source, any continuation will require additional funding and further direction from Town Council.

As we evaluate available funding sources and explore other entities now offering similar

services—many of which were not in place when our programs began—we will compile these options and present them for future consideration. Most importantly, I want to emphasize our deep appreciation for the hard work and dedication that has gone into these programs. Sharonica has devoted significant time and effort to their implementation, and we have witnessed firsthand the meaningful improvements made to homes and, most critically, the positive impact on residents' quality of life.

I want to extend my gratitude to our team, the contractors performing the work, and everyone involved in making these programs a success. Their commitment has been instrumental in delivering these essential services to our community. As we move forward, we remain committed to identifying opportunities to sustain and expand these programs, as well as guiding applicants toward other entities providing similar support. We will continue to provide updates as we explore potential funding avenues, whether through Town-initiated projects or partnerships with agencies such as the Beaufort Jasper Housing Trust, which is making a significant impact in the home safety and repair sector.

Mr. Henz asked if in the future they could receive two separate reports for the Home Safety and Repair Program and the Sewer Connection Program. Mr. Henz also asked if it was possible to receive a report of the properties that are not hooked up to sewer so we can see the magnitude of what is left to do on the Island. Missy Luick stated they would have to work with our PSD Partners to do that.

e. Introduction of Community Planning Manager - Michelle Mealer, Community Planning Manager

Michelle Mealer, the Town's new Community Planning Manager introduced herself to the Task Force and mentioned she is very excited to help define and support the critical path and priorities of the Planning Department. The Task Force welcomed Ms. Mealer and looks forward to working with her.

5. Discussion Items

6. Public Comment - Non Agenda Items

Chet Williams, Esquire stated he recently represented a couple of clients before the Planning Commission on an amendment of a previously recorded subdivision. When you look through the Code, almost invariably where the Planning Commission has review and approval authority, they have three options - they can 1) approve the application submitted, 2) they can approve with modifications or conditions or 3) they can deny it. This one section of the Code on amendments to previously platted subdivisions doesn't explicitly give the Planning Commission the authority to approve an application with conditions or modifications. I think that is something that needs to be included in the Code. This rewrite that is going on is the perfect time to do that. I think it is inherent in the Planning Commission's authority and it is clearly stated throughout the Code in numerous places that they have the authority to approve with conditions or modifications.

Chairman Stevens asked Ms. Stewart if she could provide an update on District Planning. Ms.

Stewart thanked the members of the Task Force who have been attending the District Planning meetings. It is great to have you as members of the Task Force joining and helping and assisting with these meetings. This week, the Marshes District meeting is Wednesday, February 5th at 5:00 p.m. at Grace Community Church. Typically, the meetings are from 5:00 p.m. - 7:00 p.m. We encourage all those within the specific districts to come out and share their input. Each meeting includes a presentation overview of the District, followed by breakout stations which include District themes, character, vision, aspirations as well as focus areas. Upcoming meetings that will include historic neighborhoods are our Forest Beach District Planning Meeting which will be February 20th, as well as our Chaplin District Meeting on February 27th.

7. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 3:13 p.m.

APPROVED: _____

The recording of this Meeting can be found on the Town's website at www.hiltonheadislandsc.gov



TOWN OF HILTON HEAD ISLAND

Gullah Geechee Land & Cultural Preservation Task Force

TO: Gullah Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force
FROM: Sharonica Stewart, Principal Planner Historic Neighborhoods
VIA: Michelle Mealer, Community Planning Manager
VIA: Missy Luick, Director of Planning
VIA: Shawn Leininger, Assistant Town Manager
VIA: Thomas Boxley, Executive Director of the Gullah Geechee Historic Neighborhoods Community Development Corporation
DATE: June 2, 2025
SUBJECT: Historic Neighborhood Permitting & Design Studio Report

SUMMARY

Monthly Update:

From the last reporting period (February 2025), nine new requests were received through the Historic Neighborhood Permitting and Design Studio, with four of the cases completed to date. These requests focused on the following topics:

- Density allowances and their impact on proposed development
- Allowances for property development
- Manufactured housing placement process
- Dirt road paving program

Guidance was provided to applicants on zoning regulations, land use considerations, and pathways for property development. Staff continue to work with applicants to ensure that their projects align with local development guidelines while preserving the cultural integrity of the historic neighborhoods.

Overall Program Impact:

Since the program's inception in October 2021, the Historic Neighborhood Permitting & Design Studio has provided assistance to numerous property owners and applicants within the historic neighborhoods.

Program Data (October 2021 – May 2025)

- 106 Total Design Studio requests
 - 71 Completed Cases
 - 27 Active Projects
 - 3 On-hold
 - 24 In-progress, active, under review, working with applicants
 - 8 Withdrawn and or inactive

Issues Addressed:

Staff have assisted residents with a wide range of issues:

- Drafted conceptual site designs.
- Discussed resolutions to access issues, including access relocation.
- Drafted concept site access designs (to create or relocate access easements or rights-of-way).
- Drafted landscape plans meeting LMO requirements.
- Discussed application requirements for Family Subdivision, Family Compound, and Small Residential Plan Review applications.
- Discussed density requirements.
- Assisted with street name applications.
- Discussed property line boundary adjustments and the Plat Stamp application process.
- Discussed conversion of Development Plan Review applications to Family Compound applications and conversion of conventional subdivisions to Family Subdivisions.
- Corrected addresses.
- Discussed flood elevation requirements.

COLLABORATION

Providing these services requires collaboration with Town staff from several departments, including Development Review & Zoning, Urban Design, Stormwater, Engineering, Natural Resources, Legal, Building Inspections, Capital Improvement Projects Division, and Fire Rescue.

Staff also collaborate with outside agencies and nonprofits, including Palmetto Electric, Hilton Head Public Service District, Heritage Library, and Lowcountry Gullah Foundation.

Note: To preserve residents' anonymity, details of the services provided are described generally.



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TO: Gullah Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force
FROM: Sharonica Stewart, Principal Planner Historic Neighborhoods
VIA: Michelle Mealer, Community Planning Manager
VIA: Missy Luick, Director of Planning
VIA: Shawn Leininger, Assistant Town Manager
VIA: Thomas Boxley, Executive Director of the Gullah Geechee Historic Neighborhoods Community Development Corporation
DATE: June 2, 2025
SUBJECT: Home Safety and Repair Program Update

SUMMARY

Home Safety and Repair Monthly Update:

Since the last reporting period (February 2025) multiple projects have been successfully closed out, positively impacting families within the community. The program's team remains focused on completing the remaining projects under contract while actively researching funding avenues to ensure the program's sustainability and continued success. While not mandatory, all contractors have been requested to close out active projects by June 30, 2025, to encourage timely completion and reduce the number of carryover projects in the upcoming fiscal year.

Home Safety and Repair Overall Program Impact:

Since its inception, the Home Safety and Repair Program has played a vital role in improving the safety and structural integrity of homes within the community. The program has provided significant support to homeowners by addressing critical repair needs, ensuring compliance with local building standards, and enhancing the overall livability of those within our community.

Program Data (July 2022 – May 2025)

162 Applications Received.

- 9 Applications did not meet the income qualifications.
- 4 Applications were withdrawn.
- 19 Applications received currently awaiting funding.
- 22 Applications need additional information.

108 Approved Projects.

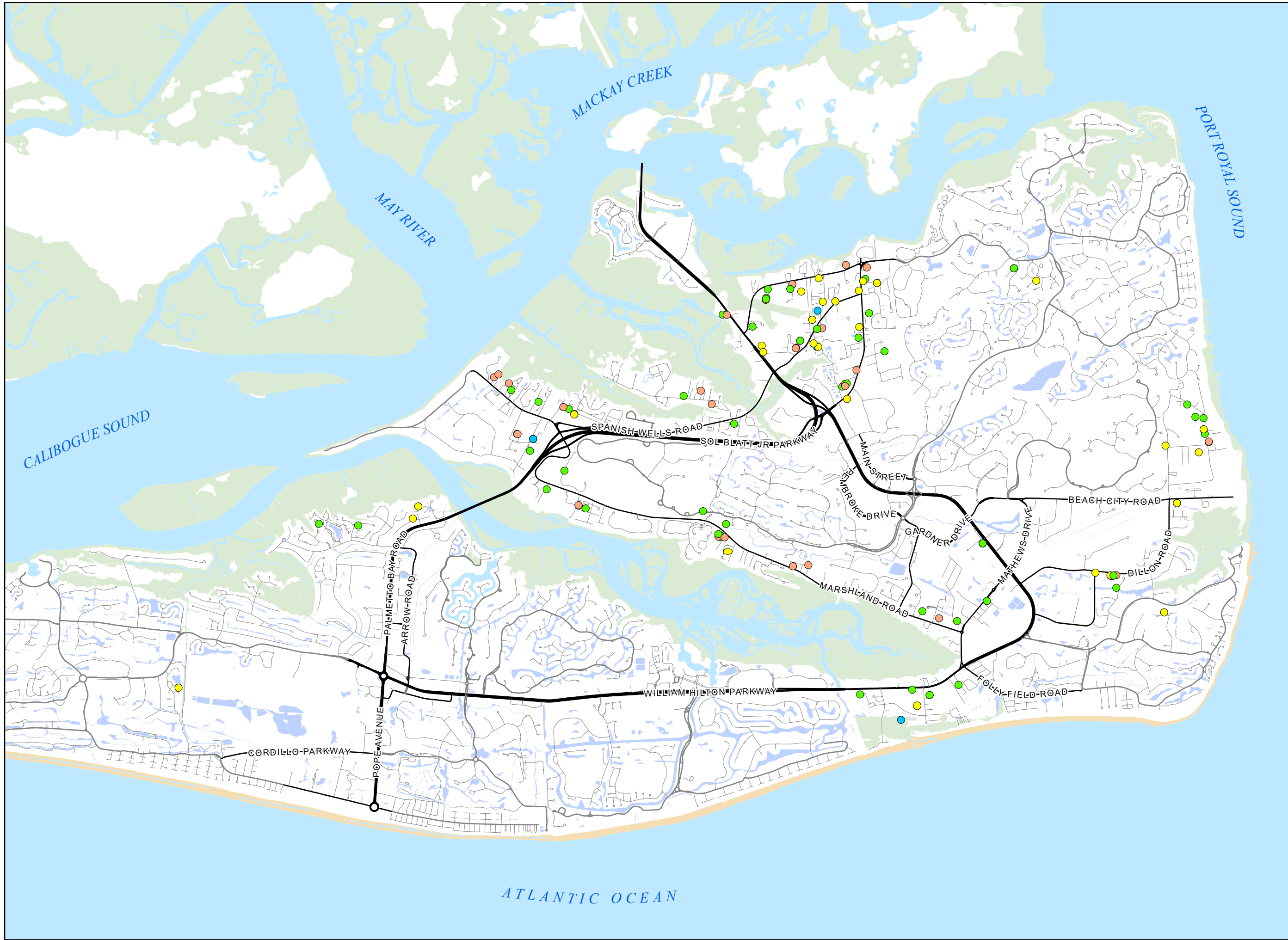
- 105 Permitted jobs have been completed for a total of \$1,479,323.52
 - 21 Tree-pruning or removal - \$60,975.35

- 84 Home repairs - \$1,418,348.17
- 3 Permitted jobs, currently under contract but not completed for a total of \$20,417.48

The total amount allocated to the program is \$1,499,741.00. Currently, there is no additional funding to execute the program.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Home Safety and Repair Project Locations



**Home Safety Repair
Project Locations**

Legend

Home Safety Repair
Application Status

- Complete- 105
- Under Contract- 3
- Awaiting Funding- 19
- In Review- 0
- Additional Info- 22

*Colored markers indicate areas of program utilization, signifying multiple applicants.

Updated: June 2, 2025



TOWN OF HILTON HEAD ISLAND
ONE TOWN CENTER COURT
HILTON HEAD ISLAND, S.C. 29928
PHONE (843) 341- 4600

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TOWN OF HILTON HEAD ISLAND

Gullah Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force

TO: Gullah Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force
FROM: Sharonica Stewart, Principal Planner Historic Neighborhoods
VIA: Michelle Mealer, Community Planning Manager
VIA: Missy Luick, Director of Planning
VIA: Shawn Leininger, Assistant Town Manager
VIA: Thomas Boxley, Executive Director of the Gullah Geechee Historic Neighborhoods Community Development Corporation
DATE: June 2, 2025
SUBJECT: Sewer Connection Program Update

SUMMARY

The Lateral Sewer Connection Program has successfully completed 35 connections to date. Town staff continue to actively collaborate with the Hilton Head Island Public Service District (PSD) to complete the remaining projects, ensuring that more residents gain access to essential sewer services.

Lateral Sewer Connection Overall Program Impact:

51 Applications received.

- 35 Jobs have been completed and paid in the total amount of \$352,748.08
- 1 Job under contract with estimates totaling \$15,640.00
- 4 Jobs pending with estimates totaling \$58,560.00 (awaiting additional program funding)
- 4 Applications were withdrawn.
- 2 Application were not qualified.
- 5 Applications awaiting funds to request estimates from PSD.

The total amount allocated to the program is \$369,417.00
Currently, there is no additional funding to execute the program.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Sewer Connect Project Locations

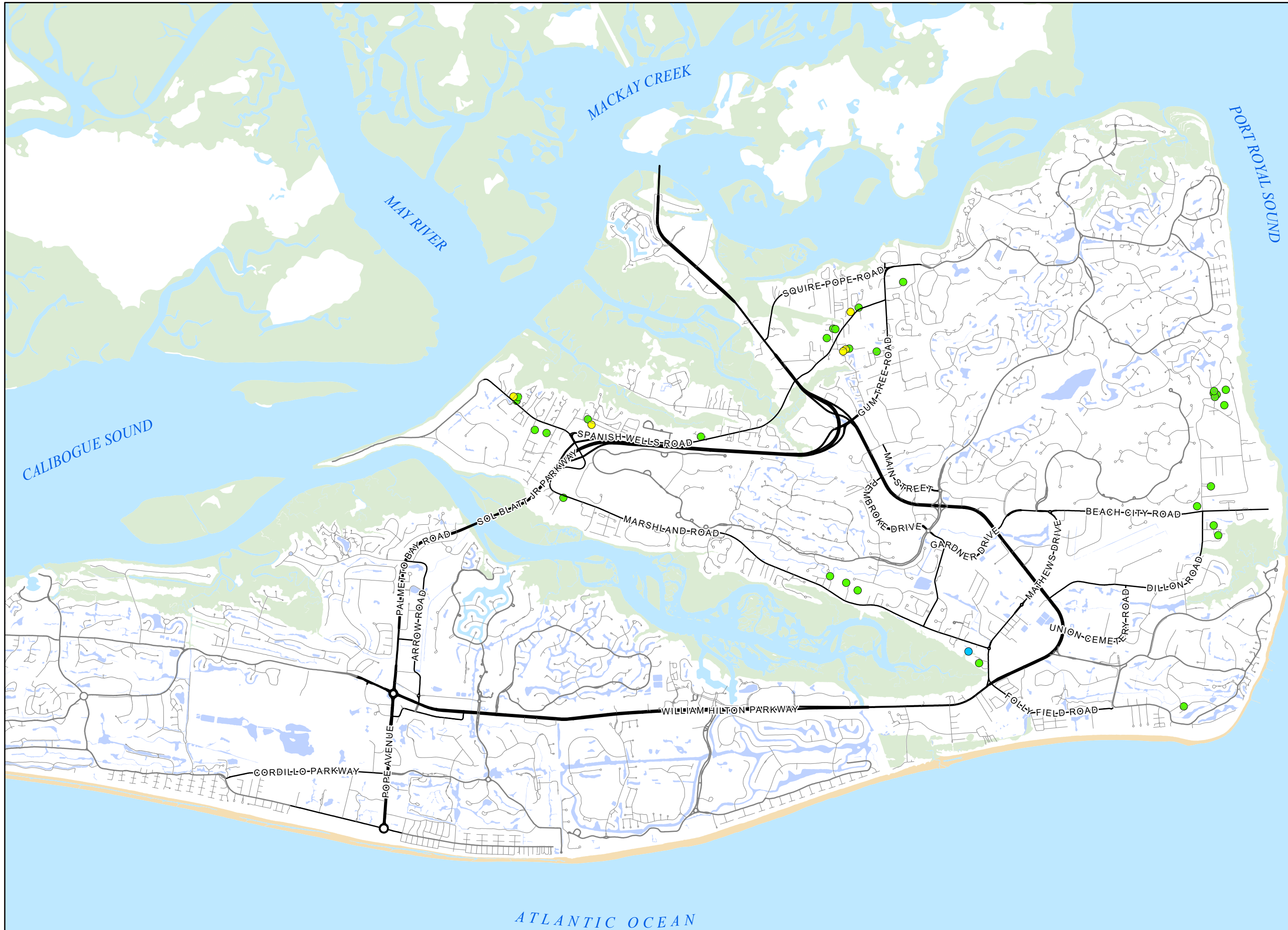
**Sewer Connection
Program
Project Locations**

Legend

- Sewer Connection
Application Status
- Complete- 35
 - Under Contract- 1
 - Pending- 9

*Colored markers indicate areas of program utilization, signifying multiple applicants.

Updated: June 2, 2025



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TOWN OF HILTON HEAD ISLAND

Gullah Geechee Land & Cultural Preservation Task Force

TO: Gullah Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force
FROM: Sharonica Stewart, Principal Planner Historic Neighborhoods
VIA: Michelle Mealer, Community Planning Manager
VIA: Missy Luick, Director of Planning
CC: Shawn Leininger, Assistant Town Manager
VIA: Thomas Boxley, Executive Director of the Gullah Geechee Historic Neighborhoods Community Development Corporation
DATE: June 2, 2025
SUBJECT: Gullah Geechee Cultural Preservation Project Report Update

BACKGROUND

A century ago, Hilton Head Island was dominated by the Gullah Geechee people. Because of years of geographic and social isolation, their distinct culture reflects their West African roots in many ways, including language, crafts, foodways, storytelling, traditions, farming, fishing, and relationship to the land. However, following extensive land acquisition by non-Gullah people and the construction of a bridge accessing the island in 1956, a steady trend has occurred that has led to significant land loss and the deterioration of the Gullah culture. Because of the alarming decrease in their percentage of population and the corresponding loss of the Gullah Geechee culture, the Town established the Gullah-Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force in 2017. Their stated mission is to:

“... identify and assist in the preservation of the Gullah-Geechee culture for the purpose of detecting and resolving issues specific to its community, including, without limitation, heirs’ property, taxes and land use, economic and sustainability issues for an improved quality of life, and through on-going educational programs, workshops and seminars.”

The project report was adopted in 2019, with three primary purposes of the report:

1. Create a broad strategy for Gullah Geechee cultural preservation, to include resource preservation and enhancement, interpretation, and heritage tourism.
2. Identify potential revisions to the Land Management Ordinance (LMO) and other land use and development related policies to better accommodate the use and development of Gullah lands.

3. Identify tools for addressing the heirs' property issues, which greatly limit what Gullah landowners can do with their land because of a lack of title to their property and related legal hurdles.

The report outlines 37 recommendations, with 16 identified as priorities for immediate action, aligning with the Town Council's 2023-2025 strategic action plan.

SUMMARY

The 37 recommendations fall into three categories: Cultural Preservation, Public Policy, and Heirs Property. Cultural Preservation efforts have focused on expanding genealogy resources through the Heritage Library, launching oral history initiatives to preserve elders' stories, developing guided and self-guided tours of Gullah sites, and designing interpretive signage to share Gullah stories across the Island. Other efforts include supporting educational programs for youth, cultural awareness training for Town staff, and initiatives to support Gullah-owned businesses. Additionally, the Town has initiated an inventory of cultural resources and reaffirmed the importance of Gullah churches and cemeteries as anchors of the community.

Public Policy recommendations have led to reforms aimed at reducing land development barriers within the Historic Gullah Geechee Neighborhoods. These include streamlining development review processes, supporting property owners in navigating zoning regulations, adding Family Compound and Subdivision development options, and allowing greater flexibility in road and drainage standards. The Town has also introduced education programs on land use and property tax policies, advocated for community reinvestment by local banks, and established a partnership with a community organization to assist with funding to help property owners avoid tax-related land loss.

Progress has also been made in addressing heirs' property issues by encouraging families to utilize local resources such as the Heritage Library and partnering with regional organizations. While some recommendations related to heirs' property remain under development, the Town continues to explore ways to expand legal support and awareness.

Several policy-related recommendations remain to be activated. These include adjusting zoning standards and development tools to allow greater development flexibility. Additional goals include updating regulations to reflect traditional Gullah architectural styles, way of living and evaluating tax relief strategies based on current land use rather than market value.

To support these future efforts, the Gullah Geechee Historic Neighborhoods Community Development Corporation is expected to take a lead role. The Corporation will implement a cultural preservation plan for the Island, develop a Gullah authenticity certification program, and strengthen tourism strategies through cultural promotion and heritage branding.

The Town of Hilton Head Island remains deeply committed to preserving the Gullah Geechee heritage through thoughtful action and sustained partnership. Future steps will include integrating recommendations into the Land Management Ordinance rewrite, continuing community engagement, and reinforcing partnerships with state and national preservation organizations. With a strong foundation already in place, the Town and Gullah Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force will continue working together to protect Gullah land, resolve heirs' property issues, and promote the cultural heritage of the Gullah people for generations to come.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Gullah Geechee Cultural Preservation Project Report Presentation



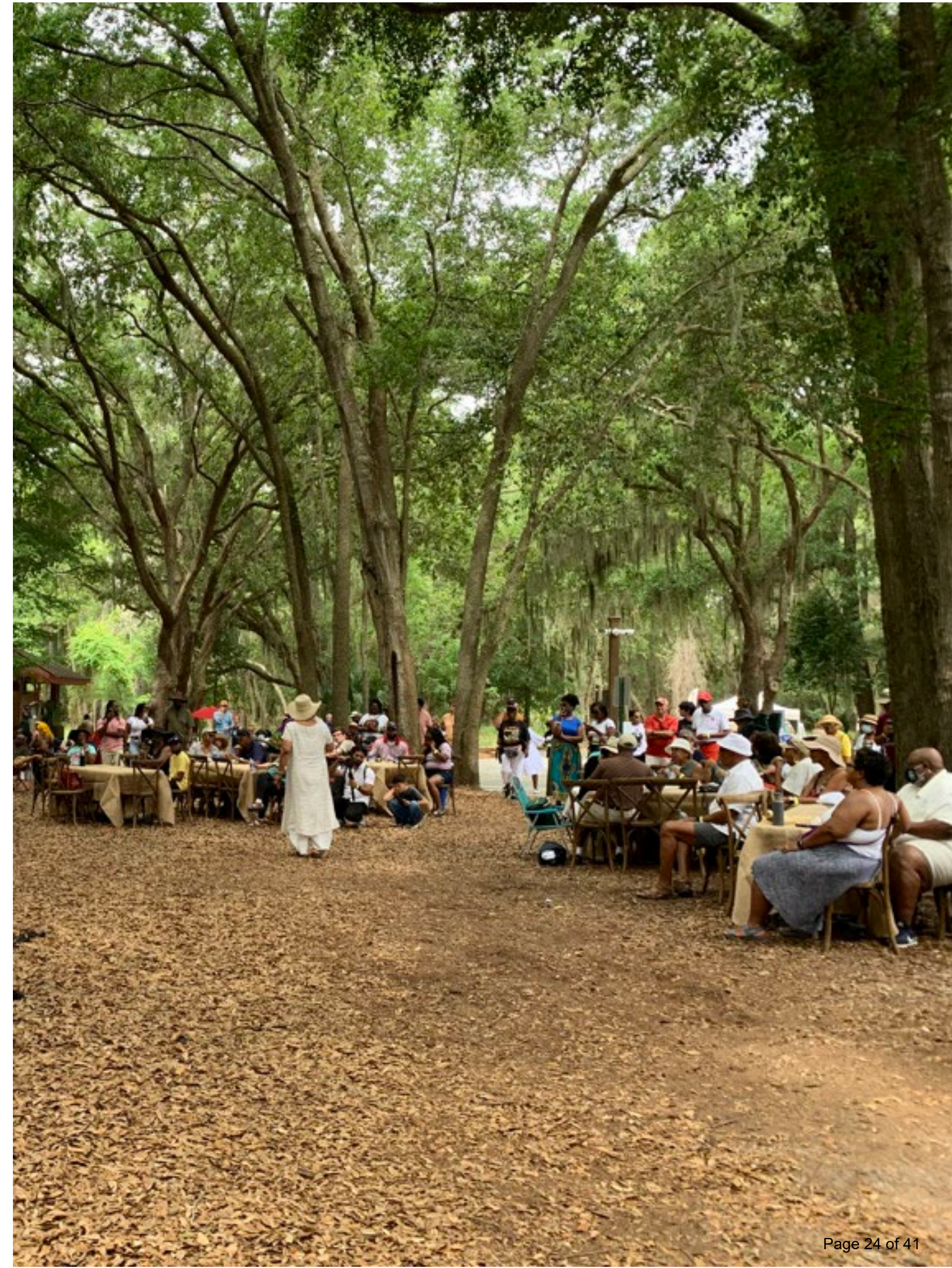
TOWN OF HILTON HEAD ISLAND

GULLAH GEECHEE CULTURAL PRESERVATION PROJECT REPORT



PRESENTATION OVERVIEW

1. Purpose and Background
2. Recommendation Categories
3. Activated Recommendations
Activated, means a recommendation has been put into action and is now actively being used or carried out as part of the Town's standard procedures.
4. Recommendations In Progress by District Plans & LMO Project
5. Recommendations to be Carried Forward by the GGHNCDC
6. Summary of Key Achievements
7. Next Steps and Continued Commitment



PURPOSE + BACKGROUND

The Gullah Geechee Cultural Preservation Project focuses on preserving and celebrating the rich heritage of the Gullah Geechee community on Hilton Head Island through strategies addressing cultural preservation, public policy, and heirs' property challenges. The report outlines 37 recommendations, with 16 identified as priorities for immediate action, aligning with the Town Council's 2023-2025 strategic action plan. Several of the recommendations have been successfully activated, while the remaining are in progress to be implemented through upcoming efforts such as district planning, the LMO rewrite, and collaboration with the Gullah Geechee Historic Neighborhoods Community Development Corporation.

This comprehensive approach demonstrates the Town's commitment to preserving the Gullah Geechee culture and addressing critical challenges faced by the community. Through collaboration with the Gullah Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force, Gullah Geechee Historic Neighborhoods Community Development Corporation, community organizations, and external partners, the Town is making measurable progress toward implementing the recommendations and ensuring the sustainability of this cultural heritage.



RECOMMENDATION CATEGORIES

Cultural Preservation = CP

Focused on preserving the Gullah Geechee identity through education, storytelling, historic site interpretation, cultural events, youth engagement, and creative heritage tourism efforts.

Public Policy = PP

Supports systemic changes that protect Gullah-owned land and empower residents—includes updates to zoning, land use regulations, application fee structures, and economic development incentives.

Heirs Property = HP

Addresses generational land ownership challenges by promoting legal education, supporting title clearance, encouraging family planning, and advocating for resources to prevent land loss.





ACTIVATED RECOMMENDATIONS



ACTIVATED RECOMMENDATIONS

CP-1 – Promote Heritage Library

CP-2 – Fundraising Initiative for Gullah Cultural Programs & Interpretive Sites

CP-3 - Adapting GGCHC Interpretive Themes for Consistent Gullah Storytelling on Hilton Head Island

CP-4 – Create Multi-Format Self-Guided Tours of Gullah Sites



ACTIVATED RECOMMENDATIONS

CP-5 - Consistent Wayfinding and Exhibit System for Gullah Cultural Sites

CP-6 – Student-Led Oral History Program regarding Gullah Elders

CP-7 – Education Program

CP-8 - Engaging Youth Through Interactive Cultural Interpretation



ACTIVATED RECOMMENDATIONS

CP-11 - Technical and Financial Assistance for Gullah Businesses

CP-15 - Comprehensive Inventory of Gullah Cultural Resources on Hilton Head Island

CP-17 – Outreach with Gullah Churches

CP-19 – Preservation and Recognition of Gullah Cemeteries



ACTIVATED RECOMMENDATIONS

PP-2 – Fast Track Family Compound and Family Subdivision Applications

PP-3 – Historic Neighborhood Permitting and Design Studio

PP-4 – Establish an Overlay District

PP-5 – Family Compound/ Family Subdivision



ACTIVATED RECOMMENDATIONS

PP-6 – Allow Site Design Flexibility

PP-11 – Fund for Delinquent Taxes

PP-12 – Educational Meetings and Workshops

PP-13 - Promoting CRA Compliance to Expand Financial Access in Historic Gullah Neighborhoods



ACTIVATED RECOMMENDATIONS

HP-1 – Heir’s Property Family Research Project

HP-2 – Coordinate with Heirs’ Property Organizations

HP-3 - Center for Heirs Property Preservation Satellite Office
Explored, not activated.





RECOMMENDATIONS IN PROGRESS BY DISTRICT PLANS & LMO PROJECT



RECOMMENDATIONS IN PROGRESS BY DISTRICT PLANS & LMO PROJECT

PP-7 – Implement Transfer of Development Rights in Historic Gullah Neighborhoods

PP-8 – Preserve Gullah Land Ownership Through Development Rights Purchase

PP-9 - Design Regulation Amendments to Reflect Gullah Cultural Traditions





PRAISE HOUSE



RECOMMENDATIONS TO BE CARRIED FORWARD BY THE GGHNCDC



RECOMMENDATIONS TO BE CARRIED FORWARD BY THE GGHNCDC

CP-9 – Partnering to Promote Gullah Cultural Attractions Regionally

CP-10 – Integrating Gullah Culture into Island-Wide Tourism Marketing

CP-12 – Gullah Authenticity Certification Program

CP-13 - Leveraging Economic Impact Studies to Strengthen Gullah Heritage Tourism

CP-14 – Establish Open-Air Gullah Market

CP-16 - Comprehensive Cultural Preservation Plan with a Focus on Gullah Heritage



RECOMMENDATIONS TO BE CARRIED FORWARD BY THE GGHNCDC

CP-18 – Landowner-Developer Partnership Program for Historic Gullah Neighborhoods

PP-1 – Development Fee Waivers and Grant Assistance for Gullah Neighborhoods

PP-10 – Reduce Tax Burden Through Current-Use Valuation in Historic Gullah Areas

PP-14 – Temporary and Seasonal Signs

HP-4 – Fund to Clear Property Titles



SUMMARY OF KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- Numerous recommendations activated since adoption
- Strong community and inter-agency collaboration in place
- Measurable impacts on cultural preservation, economic opportunity, and policy reform
- Foundation laid for continued progress through the Gullah Geechee Historic Neighborhoods Community Development Corporation.



NEXT STEPS & CONTINUED COMMITMENT

- Support activation of remaining recommendations via district plans, the Land Management Ordinance rewrite and Gullah Geechee Historic Neighborhood Community Development Corporation
- Continue public engagement and input for cultural preservation planning
- Strengthen partnerships with local, state, and national preservation organizations
- Advance land protection strategies, support heirs' property resolution efforts, and expand programs tailored to the needs of the historic neighborhoods.



WHAT IS HAIN'T BLUE?

Sometimes called robins egg blue or carolina blue, haint blue is more than just a popular lowcountry color. Used on porch ceilings or a front entrance, haint blue is rooted in a tradition that represents a deeper



“Preserving Gullah Geechee heritage is not just a project—it is a responsibility. Through unity, strategic action, and respect for the past, we are shaping a future where culture and community thrive together on Hilton Head Island.”

