



Town of Hilton Head Island

Gullah Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force Meeting

Monday, March 2, 2026, 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 October 20, 2025.
4. **Staff Report**
 - a. Historic Neighborhood Permitting & Design Studio Report - Sharonica Stewart, Project Manager - Gullah Geechee Historic Neighborhoods Community Development Corporation
 - b. Gullah Geechee Cultural Preservation Project Report Update - Sharonica Stewart, Project Manager - Gullah Geechee Historic Neighborhoods Community Development Corporation
 - c. Land Management Ordinance Task Force Update - Shea Farrar, Principal Planner - CP
5. **Discussion Items**
 - a. Approval of Proposed 2026 Meeting Dates
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, October 20, 2025, 2:30 PM Minutes

1. Call to Order

Chair Stevens called the meeting to order at 2:30 p.m. In attendance were: Chair Stevens, Vice-Chair Simmons, Mr. Abdul-Malik and Ms. Wright.

2. Adoption of the Agenda

Vice-Chair Simmons moved to approve the Agenda. Ms. Wright seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

3. Approval of the Minutes

a. Regular Meeting Minutes of August 4, 2025.

Mr. Abdul-Malik moved to approve the Minutes of August 4, 2025. Ms. Wright seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

4. Staff Report

a. Historic Neighborhood Permitting & Design Studio Report – Sharonica Stewart, Principal Planner Historic Neighborhoods

Ms. Stewart stated that the Historic Neighborhood Permitting and Design Studio provides a wide range of services to residents within the Town's historic neighborhoods. These services include assistance with business licensing, conceptual site planning, and related development support.

She reported that since the last reporting period (August 2025), seven new requests have been received. Ms. Stewart highlighted an increase in family compound and family subdivision applications during this period. Since the last meeting, three family compound applications, two family subdivision applications, and three small development plan reviews have been submitted.

To date, there have been a total of 20 requests in 2025 through the Historic Neighborhood Permitting and Design Studio, of which eight have been completed and approximately 12 remain active.

b. Land Management Ordinance Update – Shea Farrar, Principal Planner - CP

Shea Farrar proceeded to give the Task Force an update on the LMO and advised we are continuing with the initial drafting of different modules. It is being coordinated with the District Planning project as we move forward. On September 16, 2025, the LMO Task

Force was created by Town Council. Town Council will appoint the members which will be our public forum for review of the new LMO. The Task Force will provide a structured forum for community members, technical experts and other stakeholders to contribute their knowledge and perspectives. The Task Force will make recommendations to Town Staff, the Planning Commission and Town Council, ensuring that ordinance revisions strike a balance between community character, economic vitality and environmental stewardship. The members of the Task Force will total 21. It is anticipated that the LMO will go through this Task Force as the public process, and we anticipate adoption by the middle of 2026.

c. District Planning Update – Shea Farrar, Principal Planner - CP

Shea Farrar stated they are very excited that we will have completed initial drafts of all the district plans by the end of this month. We will begin a public process in December when we will have a Workshop for the districts, and I believe the LMO will also be a portion of that. After the Workshop in December, we will begin the formal adoption process. It will come through the Boards, including the Task Force, as well as the Planning Commission.

5. Discussion Items

a. Land Preservation Update - Luana G. Sellars, Lowcountry Gullah Foundation

Luana Graves Sellars reviewed with the Task Force the Land Preservation Impact Report for 2025 and focused on items that the Lowcountry Gullah Foundation has been working on, as follows: this year with the delinquent tax distributions, we had our biggest year that we have had as far as need and expenditures are concerned. There was a 45% need on Hilton Head Island that we provided. We continue to hold Workshops for the Community — we did two with the Center for Heirs Property, one with the County Treasurer and one with the Heritage Library on genealogy. We have also increased the number of Will clinics that we are providing. We have a partnership with Low Country Legal Volunteers and were able to acquire a grant to do 225 free Wills. We have two more clinics coming up in November and December. Through the partnership we have with Low Country Legal Volunteers, we were able to get a grant that is actually paying for a part-time Attorney that is focused on Heirs property issues.

We are trying to expand our reach and effectiveness through the different grants and education that we are able to provide. This October, we have a marketing campaign that will be airing on television commercials in the Community.

Ms. Graves Sellars answered several questions from the Task Force.

6. Public Comment - Non Agenda Items

7. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 3:32 p.m.

APPROVED:

The full recording and a transcript 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, Project Manager Gullah Geechee Historic Neighborhoods Community Development Corporation
VIA: Thomas Boxley, Executive Director Gullah Geechee Historic Neighborhoods Community Development Corporation
DATE: March 2, 2026
SUBJECT: Historic Neighborhood Permitting & Design Studio Report

BACKGROUND

The Town of Hilton Head Island publicly launched the Historic Neighborhoods Permitting and Design Studio in October 2021.

The program was established to serve as a “one-stop” support resource for residents, property owners, and business owners in the Town’s historic neighborhoods - specifically to help them navigate land use and development standards, prepare development applications, and reduce barriers related to property use and development (including matters such as buffers, setbacks, easements, and rights-of-way). The Town also framed the program as a practical tool to help preserve historic neighborhoods and culture, by making it more streamlined for long-standing families to maintain, improve, and responsibly develop land that has often been held across generations.

SUMMARY

Monthly Update:

From the last reporting period (October 2025), eight new requests were received through the Historic Neighborhood Permitting and Design Studio. These requests focused on the following topics:

- Family Subdivision
- Structural Demolition
- Density allowances for property development
- Manufactured housing placement process
- Building standards and permitting requirements for modular and stick-built structures

Program Overview:

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

The table below presents a year-by-year summary of the program's performance and overall impact from October 2021 to February 2026. It outlines the number of requests received, completed requests, and active requests for each calendar year.

Year	Total Request	Completed Request	Active Request
2021	19	19	0
2022	18	18	0
2023	36	34	2
2024	21	15	6
2025	26	13	13
2026	6	2	4
Total	124	100	24

Over the five-year reporting period, the program has received 126 service requests. Of these, 102 have been completed, while 24 requests remain active.

Request Addressed:

Staff have assisted residents with a wide range of issues:

- Drafted conceptual site designs.
- Discussed resolutions to access issues, including access relocation.
- Discussed application requirements for Family Subdivision, Family Compound, and Small Residential Plan Review applications.
- Discussed density allowances.
- Assisted with street name applications.
- Discussed property line boundary adjustments and the Plat Stamp application process.

COLLABORATION

Providing these services requires collaboration with Town staff from several departments, including Planning, Engineering, Capital Improvement Projects, and Fire Rescue.

Staff also collaborate with outside agencies and nonprofits, including Lowcountry Gullah Foundation.

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



TOWN OF HILTON HEAD ISLAND

Gullah Geechee Land & Cultural Preservation Task Force

TO: Gullah Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force
FROM: Sharonica Stewart, Project Manager Gullah Geechee Historic Neighborhoods Community Development Corporation
VIA: Thomas Boxley, Executive Director of the Gullah Geechee Historic Neighborhoods Community Development Corporation
DATE: March 2, 2026
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.

SUMMARY

The report identifies 37 recommendations, which 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.

Recommendation Update

CP-12: Establish a Gullah Authenticity Certification Program (*in-progress*)

This recommendation was intended to create a framework to identify and elevate authentic Gullah-owned businesses and services through an adopted certification.

The intent of this recommendation is being implemented through the development of *Experience Gullah* (www.experiencegullah.org), a digital cultural marketing and storytelling platform managed by the Gullah Geechee Historic Neighborhoods Community Development Corporation (GGHNCDC). Experience Gullah is designed to promote authentic Gullah-owned businesses by providing visibility through website listings, video features, and direct click-through opportunities. Rather than issuing a

formal certification logo, the platform functions as a promotional tool that prioritizes authenticity while expanding market reach.

At this time, the GGHNCDC has compiled an identified list of local Gullah-owned businesses, organized by profession. The Corporation is currently reviewing each business's status, licensing, and digital presence to ensure a clear and accurate understanding of the current landscape of Gullah-owned businesses.

CP-14: Establish an Open-Air Market Pilot Program (*in-progress*)

This recommendation was originally intended to establish a pilot open-air market to sell food, arts, and crafts tied to Gullah culture, increasing cultural visibility and providing economic opportunities for Gullah Geechee residents who may not otherwise be positioned to operate full-scale businesses.

With the continued growth of technology and the evolving landscape of online commerce and economic opportunity, the intent of this recommendation is being met through the development of the *Experience Gullah* platform. At this time, we do not have a single physical location-based market. The platform provides a dedicated digital space for Gullah Geechee business owners to promote food, arts, crafts, and culturally rooted services to a broader audience beyond the Island. This approach expands visibility, reduces barriers to participation, and supports economic development while maintaining cultural authenticity.

At this time, the GGHNCDC is developing structured marketing packages for business owners. Upon completion, the Corporation will conduct targeted one-to-one outreach with local Gullah Geechee business owners to support participation and ensure the platform reflects authentic cultural representation consistent with the intent of the recommendation. The groundwork for this process has been laid through our Money Talks financial education series. We are currently planning year three of the series.

CONCLUSION

The Town of Hilton Head Island remains deeply committed to preserving the Gullah Geechee heritage through thoughtful action and sustained partnership. With a strong foundation already in place, the Town, the GGHNCDC, and the Gullah Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force will continue working collaboratively to protect Gullah land, address heirs' property issues, and promote the cultural heritage of the Gullah Geechee people for generations to come.

ATTACHMENTS

None



The Town of Hilton Head Island
**Gullah Geechee Land & Cultural Preservation
Task Force
2026 Meeting Schedule**

PUBLIC MEETING DATES	MEETING TIMES
March 2, 2026	1:00 p.m.
May 4, 2026	1:00 p.m.
August 3, 2026	1:00 p.m.
November 2, 2026	1:00 p.m.