

2018 JMGBL Awards Application

Submission Date	2018-06-21 10:41:59
This application is for:	J. Mitchell Graham Memorial Award
Project Title	The Independent Republic Heritage Preserve
County/Countries	Horry
Staff Contact	Kelly Moore
Job Title	Public Information Officer
E-mail Address	moore.kelly@horrycounty.org
Phone Number	843-915-8421
Please provide a summary of your entry (no more than 100 words) to be used in a handout for the awards competition and included in press releases/publications. You may either type the summary in the text box or upload it as an attachment below.	In 2018, Horry County purchased approximately 3,700 acres of biologically and historically significant land in Horry County for the purposes of creating a wetland mitigation bank, the first wetland mitigation bank created and operated solely by a County in the state of South Carolina. When established, the bank will provide a number of wetland credits, allowing the County to move forward with critical infrastructure and road improvement projects. In addition, the land will be protected by a permanent conservation easement restricting any future development and improving the unique Coastal Carolina Bay habitat.
Presentations may include more than one speaker; however, each speaker should be aware that the 10-minute time limit is strictly enforced. Please list the name, title, and e-mail address of each speaker:	Jason Thompson, RIDE Program Manager, Thompson.Jason@horrycounty.org
Will any of the speakers need accommodations (wheelchair accessibility, etc.) during the competition?	No

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The Independent Republic Heritage Preserve

J. Mitchell Graham Award 2018



Benefit/Importance of the Project

1. Why was this project undertaken?

Because Horry County is located in the coastal plain, road construction within the County frequently includes encroachments within, or crossing upon, federally-protected wetland areas. These areas are regulated by Section 404 of the Clean Water Act administered by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). If a project impacts wetland areas, then efforts must be undertaken to enhance/restore other wetland areas elsewhere as mitigation for the adverse impacts. This has given rise to what are known as “mitigation banks,” which are large areas of wetlands that have undergone enhancement/restoration measures, and which the USACE has assigned for a certain number of “mitigation credits” that can be purchased by parties undertaking projects that adversely impact other wetland areas. The USACE generally requires that mitigation work or credits be acquired in the same watershed that is being impacted by the project.

It was estimated that road projects contained in RIDE III, a sales tax referendum approved by the voters of Horry County for recommended road improvement projects, would require approximately 1,200-1,500 mitigation credits (the final number will actually depend upon determinations made by the USACE). Horry County estimated a total cost for mitigation credits associated with RIDE III projects at \$9,600,000-\$18,000,000. However, there was continuing concern that due to the diminishing availability of qualifying property and sources from which credits could be obtained, the anticipated cost could increase significantly over time. This concern is further exacerbated due to the limited number of local private mitigation banks and the need to support other infrastructure projects associated with the tremendous growth in Horry County.

In November 2017, Horry County became aware of a property with the potential to create a significant number of mitigation credits that was being offered for sale. Horry County engaged outside consultants to evaluate the property, and was informed that the parcel was suitable for the establishment of a wetland mitigation bank. It was estimated that it would generate between 2,000-4,000 wetland credits. Horry County saw an opportunity to purchase the property and establish a mitigation bank on its own for essentially the same cost that was estimated to purchase the credits. Such an action would also give the County the benefit of any surplus credits generated by the property exceeding the amount necessary for RIDE III projects, which could be held by the County for other future projects.

2. What is the significance of this project to your community as a whole? How does it relate in importance to the other problems in your community?

In January 2018, Horry County announced the purchase of approximately 3,700 acres of Horry County wilderness comprised of a series of Carolina Bays, relic wet pine savannah, and xeric longleaf pine sand rim immediately adjacent to the Lewis Ocean Bay Heritage Preserve, considered rare and globally unique. The property, known as the Independent Republic Heritage Preserve, will be used to create a wetland mitigation bank, and in doing so, this acreage will be protected by a permanent conservation easement restricting any future development and improving the unique Coastal Carolina Bay habitat. This property is adjacent to the Lewis Ocean Bays Tract which when complete will preserve a total of 14,141 acres of environmentally sensitive property.

This innovative approach to addressing the needs of growth within the county allows Horry County to receive the wetland credits it needs for projects in RIDE III and at the same time protects an extraordinary natural resource. Work has begun on creating the wetland mitigation bank. That plan includes improvements to the quality of the habitat. It also allows for the possibility of future passive recreational uses for residents, such as hiking, biking, and bird watching. The preservation of wetlands will allow for a protection of wildlife, rare, threatened, and endangered species. There will be no development of any kind allowed on this property, and will only include facilities that promote conservation and environmental education on this unique 3,700 acre tract of property. Our hope is to name the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) as the long-term steward.

The plan also includes a footprint for the extension of Gardner Lacy Road, creating a critical access point in the dense residential area of Carolina Forest. In addition to conservation and recreation benefits for Horry County residents, this project allows the county to move forward with critical infrastructure projects county-wide. The road improvement projects outlined in the RIDE III tax referendum will improve travel and access for both residents and visitors to Horry County. By establishing the mitigation bank on its own, Horry County saved taxpayer funds by avoiding the need to purchase credits at a fluctuating market cost. Those monies can be used for other important infrastructure projects.

3. How much of the county's population is benefited by the project? In what specific ways are different groups of citizens within the county better off than before?

All of the residents of Horry County benefit from this purchase and from the establishment of the wetland mitigation bank. A protected tract of land this size with recreational opportunities will provide citizens a better living environment and possibilities for healthier life styles. This area of land is in a relatively densely populated residential area and would allow residents and visitors convenient access.

It also protects the natural landscape and environment. Wildlife and plants will be reestablished in their natural environment. In addition to conservation efforts, this also provides educational opportunities, allowing citizens to learn about and observe the plants and animals that live in this environment. The project, created and managed by a governmental agency, will benefit all of the citizens of Horry County and the numerous tourists that visit the area each year.

Coastal Carolina University, a local institution with an enrollment of approximately 10,000 students, will also utilize the completed mitigation bank to give their students access to local biology and ecosystems. Classes and labs will be able to explore the local ecology.

4. What degree of success did the project attain? What major objectives were achieved?

At the point of this submission, the project is in the early stages of implementation. So far, the county has purchased the property and contracted an environmental engineering team to begin work. The major success of the project so far is obtaining this sizeable piece of property at a reasonable cost that will allow for the extension of a critical road, a large parcel of land dedicated to conservation, and the establishment of a mitigation bank, allowing for major road improvement projects in the county to move forward. In addition, initial feedback from agencies which approve mitigation banks has been favorable and well received.

Project Effort/Difficulty

1. What did your county have to do to accomplish its objectives?

Prior to purchase, the County engaged an outside consultant to evaluate the property to determine its feasibility with regard to the creation of a mitigation bank, the estimated number of mitigation credits needed for RIDE III projects, and the anticipated cost and availability of mitigation credits on the open market. The consultant generated maps and aerials, and also convened a meeting with various state and federal agencies to seek input as to whether the property would be approved for a mitigation bank. Additionally, a survey of the property was acquired, a Phase I Environmental Site Assessment (ESA), and title search was performed. The results of this information were provided to the decision makers, and ultimately it was decided to proceed with acquisition.

Following the purchase of the property and the mineral rights, the county moved forward with a RFP for an environmental engineering team to provide environmental services in the development of the mitigation bank. At the time of this application, that environmental firm has been selected and is moving forward with the design phase of the mitigation bank. This involves creating a wetland delineation survey using county GIS mapping, FEMA flood maps, national wetland inventory maps, and topographic surveys. Because the long term goal is for this tract to come under the stewardship of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, the county will work closely with them throughout the establishment of the mitigation bank.

2. What challenges occurred during the project? Were there any community concerns?

One of the largest challenges during this project was public perception of the purchase and project. With the recent significant growth in Horry County, residents were wary of this land being used for development. While there will be a footprint within the acreage for a much needed extension to Gardner Lacy Road, there will be no other development of any kind and the land will be protected with a permanent conservation easement. The county found that social media, and similar blogging platforms, were a key source of misinformation surrounding this purchase and the plans for the property. Key decision makers were in communication with local conservation leaders in order to assuage some of the concerns in their communities. In addition, the county worked with local media partners to disseminate accurate information about the project and the future of the land.

3. What were the nature and extent of the county government's efforts to alleviate the problems(s)? How difficult was it to accomplish the project's goals and/or objectives?

The issues of public perception did not impact the initial purchase of the property, but the county will need the public's understanding and support in order to make this a successful project. To that end, the county is working with local media partners to ensure they have full and accurate information about the project. Horry County will also use its own social media platforms to document the project in the different phases to give the public an inside look at each step of the development of the mitigation bank, as it unfolds. This could also allow for the opportunity for public feedback on the possibilities for passive recreation opportunities.

4. Was financing the project an obstacle? Were there any unusual factors inherent in financing the project?

Funds for this project were provided through the Capital Penny Sales Tax program in Horry County, known as RIDE (Road Improvement Development Effort), which funds major road improvements in the county.

Ordinarily, Horry County would have independent appraisals performed prior to the acquisition of real property. However, this case was extraordinary in that the County's interest in this property was for purposes of acquiring mitigation credits, and purchase of this property provided the County far more credits for roughly the same cost estimated to obtain credits necessary for just the RIDE III roads projects. Moreover, Horry County had assessed this property for tax purposes at a valuation of \$16,946,900. Finally, the County was in possession of two 2015 appraisals of the entire tract relating to a condemnation action, both of which estimated the value of the total tract at approximately \$9,500,000.

Using this value, the total negotiated purchase price of \$11,060,790 was reasonable taking into consideration an appropriate annualized appreciation. The total cost of the project is estimated to be \$12,105,790, including the purchase of mineral rights and the anticipated cost of creating the mitigation bank. The market value of mitigation credits are currently approximately \$8,000 per credit, and the county anticipates between 2,000 and 4,000 credits will be created, making the total value of this project \$16,000,000 to \$32,000,000.

5. Did any agencies, citizen groups, or other organizations assist your county with this project? Did their participation pose any particular challenges or offer any unique contributions or benefits?

Horry County is working closely with several local, state and federal agencies throughout the project to ensure the success of the wetland mitigation bank. The agencies include United States Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control, South Carolina Ocean and Coastal Resource Management, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, United States Army Corps of Engineers, South Carolina Forestry Commission, South Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, United States Environmental Protection Agency, and the South Carolina Interagency Review Team. In addition, the county has hired private contractors and a private environmental firm to prepare all the appropriate documentation for approval as a mitigation bank and to solicit feedback for preparing the necessary submittals for establishing a mitigation bank.

Working together with the agencies above poses unique challenges and benefits. One of the biggest constraints facing all of these agencies is time. This project will require site visits and data analyzation to ensure that the property is being restored to the expectations of the aforementioned agencies. As state agencies try to operate on flat budgets, one of the first resources reduced is manpower and the undertaking of projects outside of their own organization. Projects of this size take cooperation between agencies to ensure all identified goals are addressed and ultimately attained.

One of the largest agency constraints is the availability of manpower and resources from the South Carolina Forestry Commission (SCFC) to introduce controlled fire onto the property. Fire is a natural activity that promotes species diversity and wildlife habitat in addition to reducing the fire load within the property. When controlled, fire is a very cost-effective way to improve numerous properties of the land. SCFC budget limitations could impact the availability of personnel and resources. Finally, this project will be at least five years in length and there is always the potential for changes in key personnel. We also anticipate the challenge of proper transfer of knowledge and selection of key personnel.

6. Are there any unresolved problems or other goals left to tackle?

The wetland mitigation bank will not be completed until the end of the fifth establishment year. Credits are released each year according to the success of mitigation activities performed within the property. The county will need to manage the project timeline to ensure the credits are available as needed for the RIDE III road improvement projects.

Project Originality/Innovation

1. Justify the uniqueness of this project. What makes it different from other projects designed to achieve the same objective?

According to our research, this is the first wetland mitigation bank created and operated by a County in South Carolina. Wetland banks are typically created by Private organizations. These private organizations often purchase the property themselves or they will work with individual land owners as “partners” that share the returns based on an agreed-upon percentage of the profits. The bank can only be used to support projects within a specific service area as defined by the controlling agency. Another way that wetland banks are created is by State Government Agencies such as the South Carolina Department of Transportation. If a bank is created by a state agency, its intended purpose may be for a large specific project or to cover a multitude of smaller projects. These banks can be negotiated to cover projects across multiple counties (service areas) within the state.

2. Do you know of any other similar programs in South Carolina? If so, how is your program different?

This is the first wetland mitigation bank created and operated solely by a County in South Carolina.

3. What innovations were required in accomplishing your objectives?

The Independent Republic Heritage Preserve is a creative solution for solving a few challenges in regard to planned major infrastructure projects, allowing the county to build its own mitigation bank. In managing infrastructure challenges related to significant growth, this project allows the county to not only conserve an important piece of historically and biologically significant property, but also to establish credits for future road improvement projects.

Horry County will continue to work creatively and collaboratively with all of its state and federal partners to ensure the success of this project. County project managers will maintain close working relationships with all of the contributing partners to ensure the work is completed in a timely fashion and allowing the county to access the full benefit of the mitigation credits.

4. Who provided the creativity and imagination in your project?

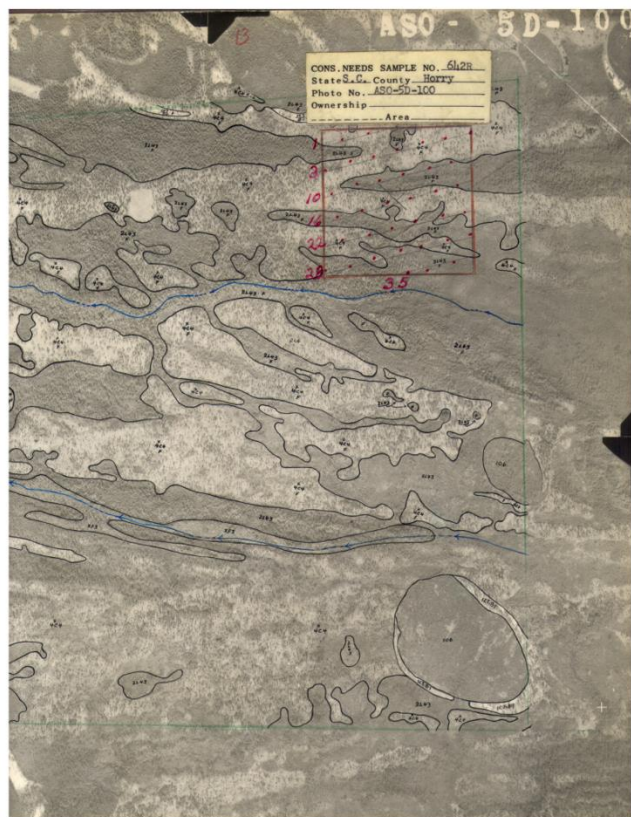
This project was a collaborative effort with direction from county council providing staff the opportunity to move forward with the purchase and development of the mitigation bank. The success of this project depends on a variety of county departments and state, local and federal agencies working collectively to create the mitigation bank and safeguard the future conservation of the property.



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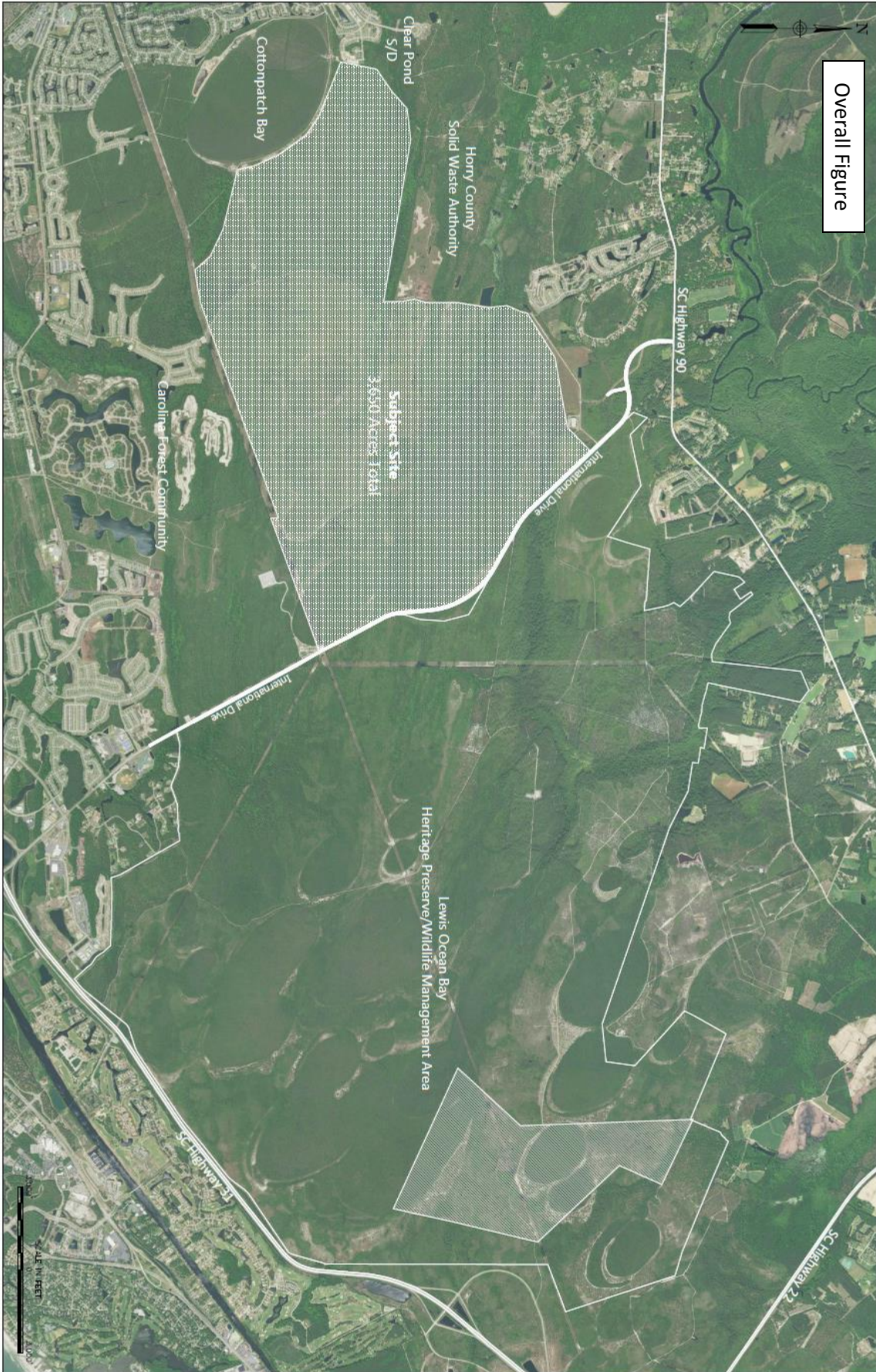
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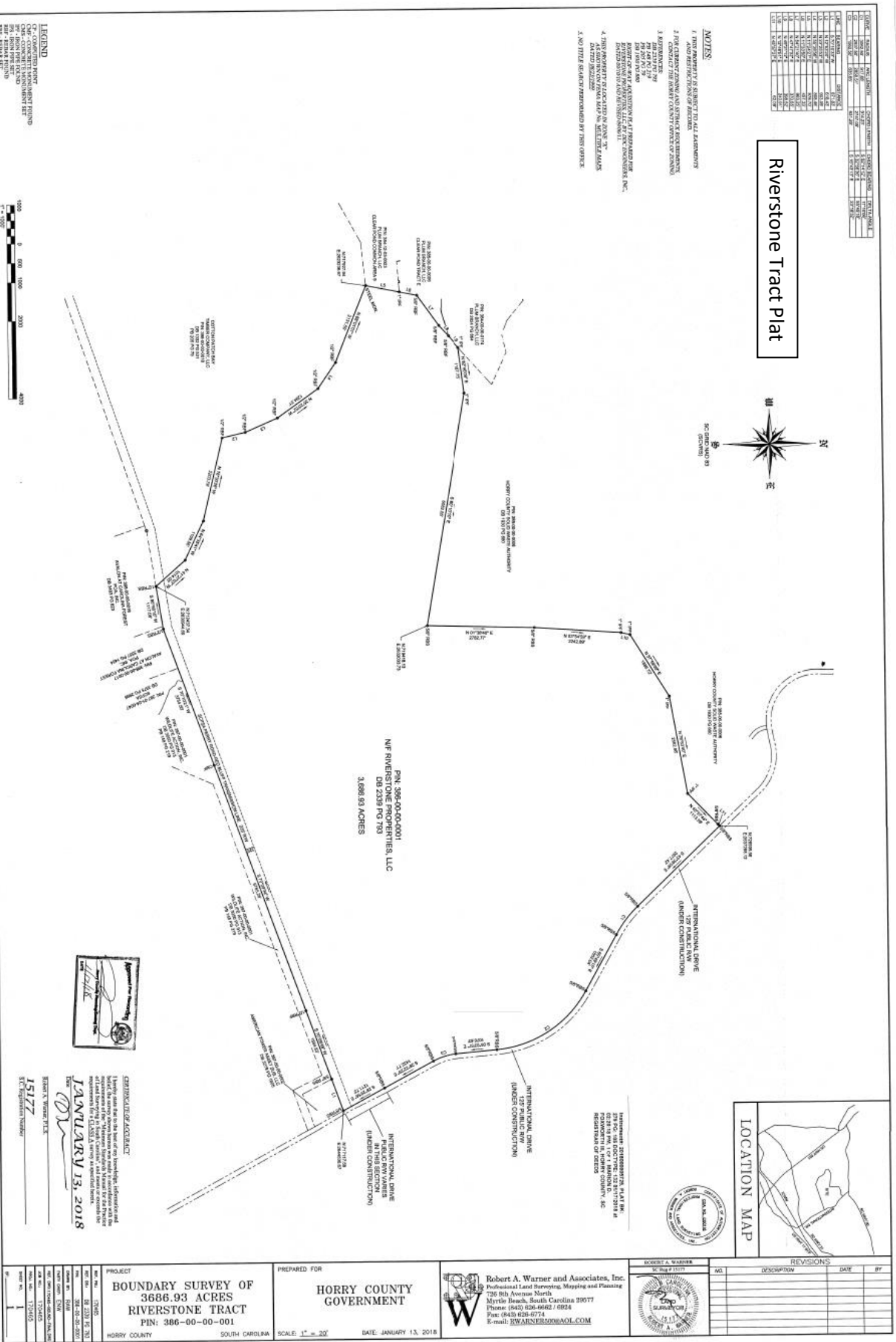
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Overall Figure

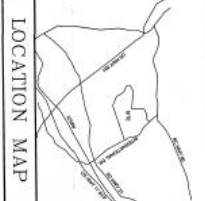


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Riverstone Tract Plat



LEGEND
 C-COMMERCIAL ZONING DISTRICT
 R-RESIDENTIAL ZONING DISTRICT
 S-SUBDIVISION ZONING DISTRICT
 U-UNDEVELOPED ZONING DISTRICT
 W-WATER ZONING DISTRICT
 X-INDUSTRIAL ZONING DISTRICT
 Y-AGRICULTURAL ZONING DISTRICT
 Z-FOREST ZONING DISTRICT
 AA-ARTS AND CULTURE ZONING DISTRICT
 BB-BUSINESS ZONING DISTRICT
 CC-COMMERCIAL ZONING DISTRICT
 DD-DEVELOPMENT ZONING DISTRICT
 EE-ENTREPRENEURIAL ZONING DISTRICT
 FF-FAMILY RESIDENTIAL ZONING DISTRICT
 GG-GENERAL RESIDENTIAL ZONING DISTRICT
 HH-HIGH DENSITY RESIDENTIAL ZONING DISTRICT
 II-INDUSTRIAL ZONING DISTRICT
 JJ-JOB OPPORTUNITY ZONING DISTRICT
 KK-KINDergarten ZONING DISTRICT
 LL-LOW DENSITY RESIDENTIAL ZONING DISTRICT
 MM-MEDIUM DENSITY RESIDENTIAL ZONING DISTRICT
 NN-NATURAL RESOURCES ZONING DISTRICT
 OO-OFFICE ZONING DISTRICT
 PP-PUBLIC USE ZONING DISTRICT
 QQ-QUARTERS ZONING DISTRICT
 RR-RECREATION ZONING DISTRICT
 SS-SINGLE-FAMILY RESIDENTIAL ZONING DISTRICT
 TT-TOWNHOUSES ZONING DISTRICT
 UU-UNDEVELOPED ZONING DISTRICT
 VV-VEHICLE SALES ZONING DISTRICT
 WW-WATER ZONING DISTRICT
 XX-INDUSTRIAL ZONING DISTRICT
 YY-AGRICULTURAL ZONING DISTRICT
 ZZ-FOREST ZONING DISTRICT



CERTIFICATE OF ACCURACY
 I, the undersigned, being a duly licensed Professional Surveyor in the State of South Carolina, do hereby certify that I am the author of the foregoing plat and that the same is a true and correct copy of the original survey as the same appears in my field notes and as the same appears on the original plat filed in the office of the Register of Deeds for Horry County, South Carolina, on this 13th day of January, 2018.

 Robert A. Warner, PLS
 15177
 S.E. 1st Street, Myrtle Beach, SC 29577

PROJECT BOUNDARY SURVEY OF 3686.93 ACRES RIVERSTONE TRACT PIN: 366-00-00-001 HORRY COUNTY SOUTH CAROLINA	PREPARED FOR HORRY COUNTY GOVERNMENT	Robert A. Warner and Associates, Inc. Professional Land Surveying, Mapping and Planning 120 2nd Avenue North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina 29577 Phone: (843) 828-8661 / 6924 Fax: (843) 828-6774 E-mail: RWARNER@GOSBAOL.COM	REVISIONS <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>NO.</th> <th>DESCRIPTION</th> <th>DATE</th> <th>BY</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td> </td> <td> </td> <td> </td> <td> </td> </tr> <tr> <td> </td> <td> </td> <td> </td> <td> </td> </tr> <tr> <td> </td> <td> </td> <td> </td> <td> </td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	NO.	DESCRIPTION	DATE	BY												
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