SCAC Awards Application

August 10, 2026

This applicaton is for:	Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Regional Cooperation Award
Project Title	Regional Collaboration for Meaningful Conservation: Green Space Programs in SC
County or Counties	Beaufort County, Jasper County
Application Contact	Hannah Nichols
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Presenter(s) Name and Title	Mark Davis, Green Space Program Manager
Main Presenter's Email Address	mark.davis@bcgov.net

Project Written Submission

Project Summary

The Beaufort County Green Space Program was developed and implemented from newly adopted legislation passed by the South Carolina General Assembly in 2022. The Program seeks to preserve land, protect critical habitat and natural resources, and provide opportunity for public passive recreation. To achieve this, the Program allows for the purchase of development rights and acquisition of lands threatened by development, which, if occurred, would have detrimental impacts on land use patterns, traffic, public safety, stormwater runoff, water quality, or other regional conservation objectives.

Taking a regional approach, the Program may fund land preservation projects located within and outside of Beaufort County: the Program made history in 2024 by contributing to the conservation of Gregorie Neck. Even though the property is located in Jasper County, preventing residential, commercial, and industrial development provides invaluable benefits to Beaufort County citizens.

This unique ability to protect land beyond jurisdictional boundaries allows conservation to be achieved at a broader scale, with benefits realized across a region rather than limited to political borders. Through collaboration with landowners, local land trusts, municipalities, neighboring counties, state and federal agencies, and national conservation organizations, the Program has helped to protect over 10,000 acres of land to date in and around Beaufort County.

Two recent regional projects to note are the Buckfield and Chelsea Tracts:

Buckfield Tracts - Preservation of 2,900 +/- acres in total, encompassing Beaufort, Jasper, and Hampton Counties, was led by the Open Space Institute and Open Land trust. The Green Space Program was a major funding contributor to the project, providing the “seed” money to attract other grant funds to assist in conserving acreage in the neighboring counties. The property was successfully transferred this June to the South Carolina Forestry Commission for ownership and stewardship of the land.

Chelsea Tracts - Preservation of 2,672-acre property located in Jasper County which had been in the eye of developers and conservation groups for years. Development of the property would have resulted in major impacts to available infrastructure as well as the environment, particularly the Port Royal Sound. The Nature Conservancy sought to buy the property but needed help with the large purchase price. In partnership with other organizations and individual donors, the Green Space Program contributed funds

for the protection of the property in perpetuity, which will also serve as publicly accessible lands owned by the South Carolina Forestry Commission.

Preservation of both Buckfield and Chelsea Tracts prevents development and negative environmental impacts that would threaten communities in Beaufort County and overall quality of life in the region. And as state forests under the stewardship of the South Carolina Forestry Commission, the public will have access to enjoy the many natural assets these properties have to offer.

The Green Space Program is a shining example of successful regional collaboration, strategies, and solutions in South Carolina; and the achievements and insights gained in the Program's inaugural years can be used to inspire other counties in developing their own Green Space Program for continued conservation outcomes across the state.

Project Effort/Difficulty

Recognizing the ongoing pressures that growth and development are placing on existing infrastructure, quality of life, and cherished natural resources, Beaufort Couty decided to be the first county in the state to consider the "County Green Space Sales Tax Act". This required development of a project program from scratch, utilizing the parameters defined in the newly adopted state legislation while also considering defined project objectives important to Beaufort County.

Essential to project success, one major challenge to overcome was the time and effort needed to get other organizations and government entities to understand the nuances of the newly developed program. Because work is divided through project evaluation, project due diligence, and leveraging of project funds with other local, county, state, and federal funding opportunities, utilizing a partnership approach, project collaboration is key to the success of the Beaufort County Green Space Program. Great working relationships with local environmental groups and local land trusts are instrumental in assisting with this process. And though there may be competing interests sometimes, the benefits and contributions of these organizations greatly assist with project outreach and community engagement.

Another welcome challenge to the Green Space Program was the appointment of the Green Space Advisory Committee, a seven-member group mandated by the state act, comprised primarily of citizens who are appointed by County Council to work with County staff and other organizations. To ensure a well-vetted committee was appointed, County staff and County Council spent significant time working together to have citizens apply, interviewed, and Identified the individuals best suited for the role. This approach posed some challenges as it required consensus building, but the benefits are that each member brings unique qualities and knowledge to the table which is essential to project success.

Because the Green Space Program is funded by taxpayer money, the most often expressed community concern is the responsible use of the funds. Keeping citizens and elected officials informed of project benefits plays a very important role in project success. And since the Program spends money in adjacent counties, taking a regional approach in achieving land use/conservation goals (as compared to a political district approach), continuous community and elected official education in an open and transparent manner is required to build trust.

Government land deals that consider land use law, resulting in a conservation outcome will always present challenges, and those challenges are dynamic in nature. While Beaufort County is happy with project outcomes to date, it is consistently looking for ways to improve the process.

Benefit/Importance of Project

Beaufort County is home to a variety of natural areas, ranging from ocean beaches and coastal marshes to pine and maritime forests. These habitats provide food and shelter for local wildlife and perform ecological services that are vital to the overall health of the environment. It is also rich in cultural resources like historic sites, scenic view corridors, landscapes of farmlands and working waterfronts, and a thriving tourism economy.

However, increasing pressures in population growth, development, and changing weather patterns make it challenging to sustain these resources while meeting future needs and services. Beaufort County has experienced tremendous growth over the last couple of decades, with neighboring Jasper County recently identified as one of the fastest growing counties in the nation. This rapid growth creates demand for residential, commercial, and costly infrastructure development that often outstrips available resources and time for intentional planning. Loss of vegetative cover due to clearing and construction of neighborhoods, roads, and parking areas severely limit the ability of the land to naturally filter stormwater runoff. The reduction of tree cover and increase in impervious surfaces allow sediments and pollutants to enter waterways as surface runoff, whereas trees provide naturally occurring infiltration and evapotranspiration. Rivers like the May and Okatie, for example, are routinely impaired by pollution. Additionally, the area is experiencing more flooding and rise in sea level due to climate change which can have damaging impacts to personal property as well as to community facilities like schools and hospitals.

Another concern is the loss of working lands to new development which will lessen the opportunity for sustainable local food sources and create a loss of historical community heritage.

Preserving the regional natural and cultural resources in the face of these pressures is vital to the County's continued environmental health and resilience, economic viability, and overall quality of life. And so, Beaufort County implemented the Green Space Program with the purpose of:

Protecting the natural environment and preserving air and water quality,

Supporting local agriculture and forestry economies,

Avoiding adverse regional, economic, environmental, and service demand impacts,

Offsetting land development pressures and reducing the need for costly infrastructure,

Providing lands for passive recreation and enhance resilience for a changing environment,

Implementing adopted land use planning policies and coordinating long range goals with other government entities, and

Preserving the area's natural beauty and increasing the overall well-being for citizens and visitors who cherish what makes this area special.

Since its start in 2023, The Green Space Program has helped to protect over 10,000 acres with thousands more across multiple projects in consideration for grant approval. Procured through a conservation easement or a fee simple acquisition, the funded projects exemplify how the Program is achieving its goals:

One project preserves active farmland, ensuring its fertile soil remains available for agricultural and silvicultural uses.

Several of the projects are in areas that fill gaps in a conservation corridor stretching from the ACE Basin to the Savannah River, providing a more regionally connected landscape that allows wildlife to move freely.

Some projects are in the vicinity of the Marine Corps Air Station, a major economic driver of the region. Protecting the land around the facility prevents incompatible development that would undermine its military mission.

Many of the projects have significant frontage along waterways, so their protection safeguards the quality of water draining into areas like the ACE Basin and Port Royal Sound, accommodates sea level rise, and provides habitat for marsh migration.

The two projects highlighted previously in the Project Summary, the Buckfield and Chelsea Tracts, will become state forests and provide public access for passive recreational opportunities.

The Green Space Program played a significant role in the conservation of these projects. Having plentiful funds that generate quickly at a local level makes the Program a strong competitor for partnerships with other organizations, especially state and federal agencies. By leveraging funding, more projects can be conserved, and regional land protection can be accelerated.

Project Originality/Innovation

There are other programs in the state that seek to protect land and provide outdoor recreational amenities. For counties, the greenbelt programs in Charleston, Jasper, Dorchester, and Berkeley would have some similarities to the Green Space Program. While other programs seek to achieve conservation goals, the Green Space Program stands apart in many innovated ways, with the primary difference being:

The Green Space Program is funded by a penny sales tax where all the proceeds go towards conservation projects/outcomes. Greenbelt programs in other counties are funded from a portion of a transportation sales tax collected over a period of several years, often ranging from seven to twenty-five, tying up the penny for long periods of time and usually bonded. Simply put, this is not the case with the Green Space Program. After a very short period of tax collection (Beaufort County did 2 years), the Green Space Program has cash in hand without having to bond for program success. Not only is bonding not needed, the funds also collect interest which in return can be used for additional conservation projects. Generating funds quickly and having them dedicated solely for land conservation purposes (unlike other penny programs), greatly assists in taking a regional approach to achieving fundamental goals. If funds are generated slower, resulting in less cash in hand, convincing citizens and elected officials of spending project funds in other counties to support a regional approach would be more challenging and likely result in setbacks of program/project goals.

The geographic reach of the Green Space Program can extend beyond county borders. Funding is available for preservation projects located outside the county, if the project provides benefits to Beaufort County. This facilitates regional coordination among counties and is one of the greatest distinctions compared to other programs, making it such an effective tool for landscape-scale conservation. By reaching across political lines, large systems like wildlife corridors and watersheds can be better coordinated for protection.

The Beaufort County Green Space Program ensures conservation projects are protected in perpetuity by and through the use of conservation easements and/or covenant and land use restrictions, which get recorded on the deed.

The Beaufort County Green Space Program places a high emphasis on local and regional planning efforts, taking into consideration long range planning documents adopted at municipal, county, and state levels. One of the primary goals of the Program seeks to drive responsible planning and land use decisions made by staff and elected officials, promoting smart growth working in concert with meaningful land conservation.

Concluding Remarks

Beaufort County sincerely hopes to be a leader in the efforts for meaningful land conservation and a resource for other counties who choose to take a proactive approach in protecting their quality of life, by balancing responsible growth with land conservation outcomes in perpetuity. So far, the properties protected by the Green Space Program have benefitted from partnerships with across local, regional, state, and federal agencies. By working cooperatively with Jasper County, the Department of Defense, the Nature Conservancy, the Open Land Trust, the State of South Carolina and more in our efforts, we are able to multiply the impact of Beaufort County's referendum dollars into meaningful land conservation. The state has empowered counties with an incredible new tool that promotes regional collaboration, it's now up to the citizens, county staff, and elected officials throughout the state to properly use it.

Beaufort County Adopts South Carolina's First-Ever Green Space Program Criteria and Application Process

Monday, September 25, 2023 6:03 PM

In a unanimous vote at their regular Council meeting, Beaufort County Council officially adopted South Carolina's inaugural Green Space Program Criteria and Application process. This action officially makes the program law and establishes the operational guidelines for its implementation.

When questioned about the county's rapid progress in achieving this milestone, Mark Davis of the Beaufort County Planning Department attributed it to having a competent team in place. He stated, "The answer is simple: put a good team on the field, and you will win." He was referring to the recently appointed Green Space Advisory Committee (GSAC), comprised of individuals possessing extensive knowledge in land preservation, who collectively form a highly effective working group.

Now that the program is adopted, Beaufort County staff can commence scheduling pre-application meetings with potential applicants. If you have any questions about the program or would like to schedule a pre-application meeting, please send an email to mark.davis@bcgov.net with the following subject line: "Request for Green Space Program Information and/or Pre-Application Meeting."

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From a Threatened Crossroads to a New State Forest

1,700 acres saved, with a new state forest on the horizon

Some conservation wins feel like the relief of finding the puzzle piece you've been searching for. Pocotaligo Station is one of those wins.

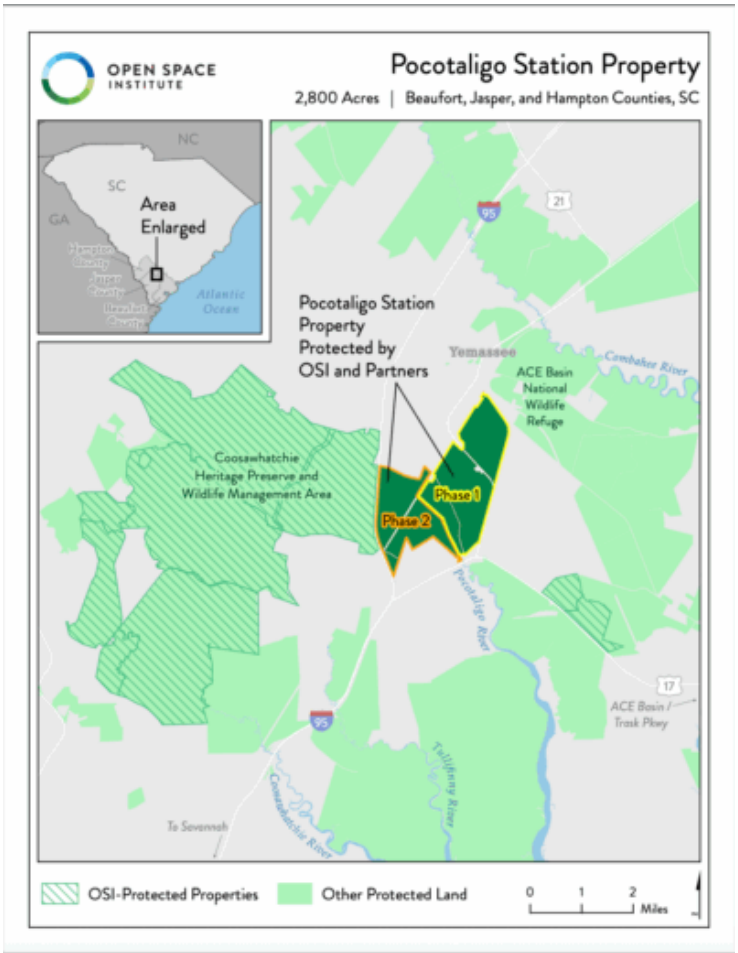
This land sits where three counties (Beaufort, Hampton, Jasper) and two rivers (Tulifinny & Pocotaligo) meet. With long stretches along a major freight rail line and Interstate 95 it's a place that's been targeted for industrial development for years. Yet it's also a landscape of quiet beauty: upland forests, vast wetlands, and ponds that feed into the Port Royal Sound.

What could have been lost under concrete

Beneath the trees, history is woven into the ground itself. Revolutionary War earthworks still rest in the woods and the first blood of the 1715 Yemassee War is believed to have been shed on or near this land that was long inhabited by the Yemassee people.

These stories could have disappeared under concrete.

Instead, this fall the Open Space Institute (OSI) and Open Land Trust (OLT) protected 1,700 of these critical acres, the first phase of a larger 3,000-acre effort that will eventually become a new state forest.



Provided by Open Space Institute

And you helped make it possible. Your support provides us with the foundation to work with crucial partners like the South Carolina Conservation Bank, Beaufort County Green Space Program, the South Carolina Forestry Commission, and Chilton Land and Timber Company that made this project a reality. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has also pledged funding for future phases.

What makes this project powerful is momentum.

It builds on more than 12,000 nearby acres already conserved by OSI, The Nature Conservancy, OLT, and state partners – creating a sweeping greenbelt from the Ashepoo, Combahee, Edisto (ACE) Basin toward the Savannah River.

Piece by piece, we're stitching together a "nature bridge" that will protect clean water, wildlife, and the sense of place that is so incredibly unique to the southern Lowcountry.

PRESS RELEASES

Conserving South Carolina's Chelsea Plantation

The 2,737-acre Jasper county property is planned for future public access.

Mount Pleasent | Published May 13, 2025

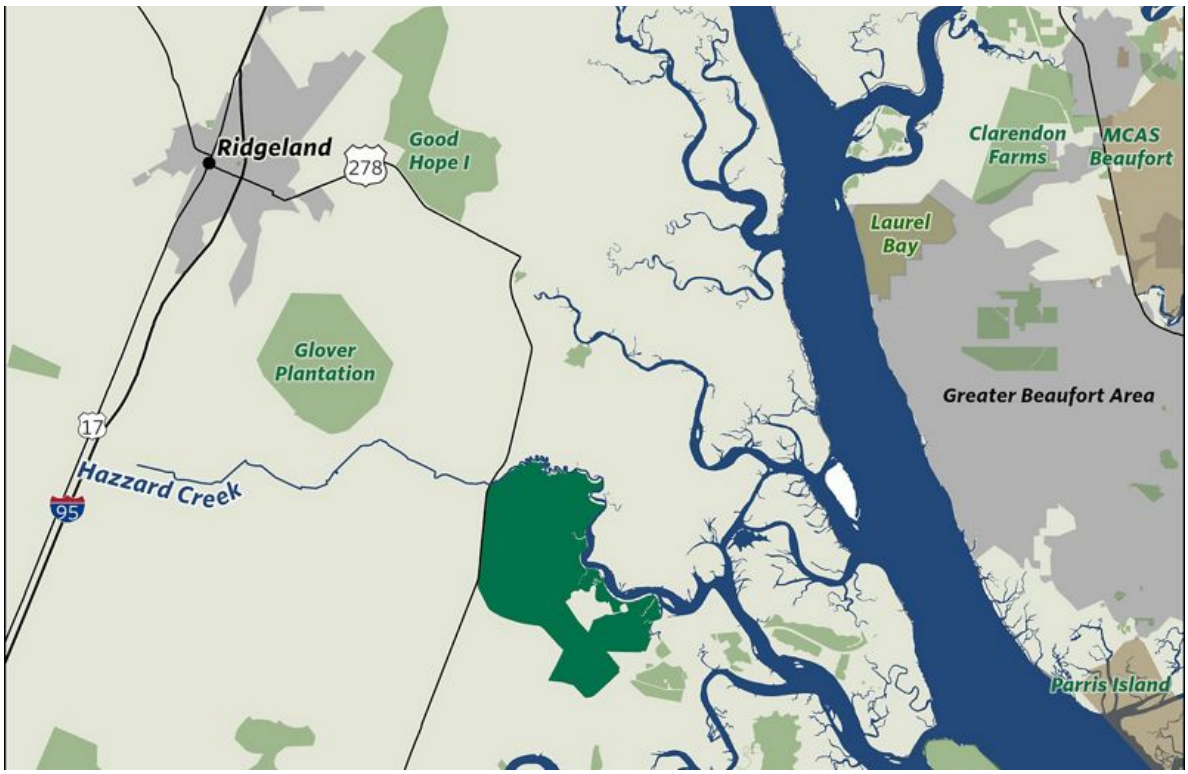
Jasper County's Chelsea Plantation – the site of a proposed development that drew widespread, vocal opposition from citizens throughout South Carolina's Lowcountry – is off the market.

The Nature Conservancy has announced the acquisition of the 2,737-acre property, identified as a high priority for conservation and under significant threat of development.

"Chelsea's fate was one of this region's major tipping points for the future of its wildlife habitat, historical character and water quality," said Dale Threatt-Taylor, TNC's executive director in South Carolina. "Developing Chelsea would have ushered in a new era of expansion in an already fast-growing region. We weren't willing to leave it to chance."

Protecting Water Quality and Wildlife Habitat

The purchase of Chelsea secures over seven miles of frontage along Hazzard Creek, which drains into the Broad River and is part of Port Royal Sound watershed. The waterfrontage also acts as a critical saltwater marsh migration corridor that will help the area adapt to future ecosystem changes and protects the water quality in Port Royal Sound.



A GROWING CORRIDOR A map features Chelsea Plantation (dark green) in relation to other protected areas (light green), including the recently acquired 4,400-acre Gregorie Neck property on the Coosawhatchie and Tulifiny rivers. © TNC

Creating a Conservation Corridor

Future plans for Chelsea include TNC placing a conservation easement on the property with Open Land Trust to permanently limit development, then transferring the property to the South Carolina Forestry Commission to create a new state forest open for public access.

The property expands an existing corridor of protected longleaf pine forests, which are vital for game and non-game wildlife. The purchase of Chelsea Plantation is the latest effort by TNC to create a conservation corridor between the famed ACE Basin and protected properties along the Savannah River. Other recent projects in the area have included the protection of the 7,300-acre Buckfield Plantation (now part of the new Coosawhatchie Wildlife Management Area) in July 2022 in partnership with Open Space Institute and the 4,409-acre Gregorie Neck property in February 2024.

> *Chelsea's fate was one of this region's major tipping points for the future of its wildlife habitat, historical character and water quality... We weren't willing to leave it to chance.*
>
> **Dale Threatt-Taylor,** Executive Director, The Nature Conservancy in South Carolina

Community Advocacy

The property was highly targeted for development, due to its prime location in the US Highway 278 corridor that connects Hilton Head to I-95 and significant developable water frontage. Residents of the small communities that dot the area as well as citizens of nearby Beaufort ty were largely against those plans.

COUNTY COUNCIL OF BEAUFORT COUNTY

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August 6, 2026

Awards Committee
Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Regional Cooperation Award
South Carolina Association of Counties
1919 Thurmond Mall
Columbia, SC 29201

Dear Awards Committee:

I am writing to enthusiastically recommend Beaufort County's Green Space Program for the Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Regional Cooperation Award.

The Beaufort County Council has proudly supported the development and implementation of this innovative program, which was established following the adoption of the South Carolina County Green Space Sales Tax Act. From the beginning, the Council recognized that meaningful conservation extends beyond jurisdictional boundaries and requires strong partnerships among counties, municipalities, conservation organizations, landowners, state and federal agencies.

The Green Space Program exemplifies regional cooperation by bringing together local governments, land trusts, landowners, nonprofit conservation organizations, South Carolina Forestry Commission and State Conservation Bank, and military installations to preserve lands that provide lasting environmental, economic, military missions, and public benefits throughout the Lowcountry. Through these collaborative efforts, the Program has helped protect more than 10,000 acres of land, including significant regional projects such as the Buckfield Tracts spanning Beaufort, Jasper, and Hampton Counties and the Chelsea Tracts in Jasper County. These partnerships have leveraged funding, protected critical natural resources, enhanced public access to conserved lands, and preserved the quality of life shared by communities throughout the region.

The Green Space Program demonstrates that the most effective solutions to growth, conservation, and environmental stewardship are achieved through collaboration rather than confined by political boundaries. By fostering regional partnerships and leveraging shared resources, Beaufort County has established a model that can inspire similar cooperative conservation efforts across South Carolina.

Thank you for your consideration of Beaufort County's Green Space Program for this prestigious award.

Sincerely,

Alice G. Howard

Alice G. Howard, Chairman
Beaufort County Council

OFFICE OF THE JASPER COUNTY COUNCIL

Jasper County Clementa C. Pinckney Government Building
358 Third Avenue – Courthouse Square – Post Office Box 1149
Ridgeland, South Carolina 29936 – 843-717-3690 – Fax: 843-726-7800

August 10, 2026

Awards Committee
Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Regional Cooperation Award
South Carolina Association of Counties
1919 Thurmond Mall
Columbia, SC 29201

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Thank you for your consideration of Beaufort and Jasper County's Green Space Program for this prestigious award.

Sincerely,

Joey Rowell, Chairman
Jasper County Council

Green Space Advisory Committee

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To: South Carolina Association of Counties
c/o Susan Turkopuls
1919 Thurmond Mall
Columbia, SC 29201

Re: The Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Regional Cooperation Award

August 10, 2026

To whom it may concern:

My name is Michael McShane, and I have the privilege of serving as the Chairman of the Beaufort County Green Space Advisory Committee. I write today in support of SCAC's consideration of the Beaufort County Green Space Program for the Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Award. Our Program is a shining example of successful regional partnerships, strategies, and solutions in South Carolina, and our achievements in fiscal years 2025 and 2026 illustrate our commitment to these ideals.

In 2025, one of the first grants made was for $1M to The Nature Conservancy for the acquisition of a Jasper County site along the Broad River. That grant enabled TNC to apply for additional competitive grants, including one from the SC Conservation Bank. More recently, the Beaufort County Greenspace Committee and recommended and received approval from Beaufort County Council to make a reimbursable grant of $6M to TNC for the acquisition of a second property also along the Broad River. This enabled TNC to move quickly on a time sensitive closing that ultimately became a State asset held by the SC Forestry Commission.

We sincerely appreciate your consideration for this prestigious Award and look forward to sharing additional information about our Program through our full application materials.

Respectfully,

Michael McShane
Chair, Green Space Advisory Committee