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## THE FINAL REPORT OF THE JOINT COASTAL GREENWAY STUDY COMMITTEE

### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Senator William Ligon – Co-Chair  
District 3

Representative Ron Stephens – Co-Chair  
District 164

Senator Lester Jackson  
District 2

Representative Alex Atwood  
District 179

Senator Ross Tolleson  
District 20

Representative William Hitchens  
District 161

Senator Ben Watson  
District 1

Representative Al Williams  
District 168

Mr. Seth Coker  
Department of Community Affairs

Ms. Katelyn DiGioia  
Georgia Department of Transportation

Ms. Jo Hickson  
Coastal Georgia Greenway, Inc.

Mr. Elmer Stancil  
Department of Economic Development

Mr. Spud Woodward  
Department of Natural Resources

## COMMITTEE FOCUS, CREATION, AND DUTIES

The Joint Coastal Greenway Study Committee (Committee) was created pursuant to Senate Resolution 26 in the 2015 Legislative Session. The East Coast Greenway is a proposed system of bicycle and pedestrian trails that, when completed, will provide users with 2,900 miles of paved trail from Maine to Florida. The Georgia component of the East Coast Greenway is the Coastal Georgia Greenway: a 155-mile multi-use paved trail that will link Savannah to St. Marys. The Committee was charged with undertaking a study of the conditions, needs, issues, and problems associated with the implementation and construction of the Coastal Georgia Greenway.

The Committee was composed of 13 members, consisting of four members of the Senate and four members of the House of Representatives. The Senators serving on the Committee were: Senator William Ligon, serving as Co-Chairman; Senator Ben Watson; Senator Lester Jackson; and Senator Ross Tolleson. The Representatives serving on the Committee were: Representative Ron Stephens, serving as Co-Chairman; Representative Alex Atwood; Representative William Hitchens; and Representative Al Williams. Other esteemed members included: Ms. Katelyn DiGioia with the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT); Mr. Spud Woodward with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR); Mr. Seth Coker with the Department of Community Affairs (DCA); Mr. Elmer Stancil with the Department of Economic Development (GDECD); and Ms. Jo Hickson with Coastal Georgia Greenway, Inc.

The Committee's first meeting was held on September 21, 2015 in Richmond Hill, Georgia, where the Committee heard testimony from: Bryan County Commissioner Don Gardner; Dr. Michael Toma with Armstrong State University; Ms. Andria Godfrey with the Department of Economic Development; Ms. Katelyn DiGioia and Mr. Karon Ivery with the Georgia Department of Transportation; as well as numerous residents and biking enthusiasts of coastal Georgia. Those members of the public who contributed to the discussion included: Mr. Luis Moore; Mr. Herb Hiller with East Coast Greenway Alliance; Ms. Denise Grabowski; Commissioner Helen Stone with Chatham County; Ms. Katherine Moore; Mr. Terry Landreth; Ms. Sandra Williamson; Mr. Jim Morrison; Ms. Marien Owens; Mr. Jim Langford; Mr. John Bennett; and Mr. John Cameron.

The Committee's second and last meeting was held on November 4, 2015 at the Coastal Regional Commission in Darien, Georgia, where the Committee heard testimony from: Mr. Paul DeNard, Ms. Katelyn DiGioia, and Mr. Brad Saxon with the Georgia Department of Transportation; Ms. Mary Walker, Mr. Karl Burgess, and Ms. Becky Kelley with the Department of Natural Resources; Ms. Jane Love from the Coastal Regional Metropolitan Planning Organization; and other residents of coastal Georgia. Those members of the public who contributed to the discussion included: Chairman Dale Provenzano with the Glynn County Board of Commissioners; Mr. David Cheney; Representative Jeff Jones; Ms. Annette Stacy; Mayor Cornell Harvey with the City of Brunswick; Ms. Carol Williams; Ms. Anne Coy; Ms. Rita McLaughlin; Mr. Brent Buice; Mr. Terry Landreth; and Mr. Will Fell.

## BACKGROUND

The Coastal Georgia Greenway is a proposed 155-mile multi-use trail that will link Savannah to St. Marys. The Coastal Georgia Greenway is the Georgia component of the larger East Coast Greenway: a proposed system of bicycle and pedestrian trails that, when completed, will provide users with a 2,900-mile route from Maine to Florida. The Coastal Georgia Greenway's 155-mile continuous trail will follow U.S. Highway 17 and other corridors across southeastern Georgia from Florida to South Carolina. It traverses parts of six coastal counties: Camden, Glynn, McIntosh, Liberty, Bryan, and Chatham. These trails will take its travelers to different towns, recreational, historic, and culture sites, and waterways. In addition, the Coastal Georgia Greenway will link to 200 miles of connector trails and seven barrier islands.

The Coastal Georgia Greenway is a shared regional vision for many residents and biking enthusiasts in coastal Georgia, as its trails will be suitable for bicyclists, joggers, and other non-motorized users for all recreational purposes.

The Coastal Georgia Greenway is currently being built by public-private partnerships of local jurisdictions, bike clubs, non-profit organizations, and citizens who believe in creating an alternative transportation network through coastal Georgia. Twenty-four percent of the Coastal Georgia Greenway has been constructed thus far, with forty-one miles having been built or funded. Completed construction of the Coastal Georgia Greenway is set for 2025, with four phases of implementation to occur over ten years.

## **COMMITTEE FINDINGS**

### **Economic Benefits of Coastal Georgia Greenway**

A substantial amount of testimony heard by the Committee focused on the potential economic impact of the Coastal Georgia Greenway. According to the research conducted by Dr. Michael Toma with Armstrong State University, Coastal Georgia Greenway will create a significant positive economic impact for Georgia, especially within its coastal communities. For example, the expenditures of local and non-local Coastal Georgia Greenway trail users will contribute to Georgia's economy, with their food, drink, and accommodation purchases. Specifically, Dr. Toma predicts that, upon completion, the Coastal Georgia Greenway will contribute on an annual basis: \$7.7 million in business revenue; 115 new jobs; \$2.6 million in new labor income; and \$5 million in new state and local tax revenue.

Ms. Andria Godfrey, the Director of Tourism Research at the GDEcD, who also contributed testimony at the first Committee meeting, agreed that the Coastal Georgia Greenway would bring more visitors and tourists to coastal Georgia, producing more visitor spending and jobs in the region.

Maintenance expenses were also discussed at the meeting. However, all of those testifying agreed that the economic benefits far outweigh the construction and maintenance costs of the Coastal Georgia Greenway.

### **Non-Quantifiable Benefits of the Coastal Georgia Greenway**

In addition to economic benefits, the Coastal Georgia Greenway's qualitative aspects provide numerous health, community, environmental, and recreational benefits. For instance, using the Coastal Georgia Greenway for recreational activity and exercise leads to healthier lifestyles leading to reduced costs in medical expenditures. According to Dr. Toma's research, sedentary lifestyles have been linked to 23 percent of deaths from major chronic diseases. Bicycling and walking are the best activities to help reduce the medical costs associated with lifestyle related diseases.

The Coastal Georgia Greenway also contributes to the environment, as an increased use of the Coastal Georgia Greenway for transportation may reduce pollution and preserve roadway infrastructure. Bicycling and walking, according to Dr. Toma, will contribute to improved air quality, as bicycling and walking do not require the use of fossil fuels. The Coastal Georgia Greenway may also contribute to water quality by providing natural buffer zones that protect waterways from pollution resulting from fertilizer and pesticide run-off.

Additionally, the Coastal Georgia Greenway may contribute to the community's quality of life by providing one more recreational asset to the region. Again, according to Dr. Toma, greenway trails create ways for individuals and families to recreate with one another, ultimately improving social relationships and contributing to community cohesion. As Mr. Don Gardner of the Coastal Georgia Greenway, Inc. discussed at the Committee's first meeting, the Coastal Georgia Greenway will also improve safety throughout the community, by removing bicyclists off the busy highways, thus preventing vehicular homicides of bicyclists.

Lastly, the Coastal Georgia Greenway may also increase property values, as parks and greenways have been found to enhance the value of near-by property.

### **Implementation of the Coastal Georgia Greenway**

The Coastal Georgia Greenway will be constructed through four phases occurring over the next ten years. According to the Georgia Department of Transportation's testimony by Mr. Paul DeNard, Ms. Katelyn DiGioia, and Mr. Brad Saxon at the second Committee meeting, Phase I will be the "Island Hopper Trail," and extend from Jekyll Island to the Sapelo Island Visitor Center and Ferry. This phase is estimated to cost approximately \$7,150,000. Phase II will be the "Tabby Trail," and extend from St. Marys Waterfront Park and Ferry to the Jekyll Causeway. Phase II is estimated to cost approximately \$17,979,990. Phase III will extend from the Sapelo Visitor Center to Richmond Hill, and is estimated to cost approximately \$25,405,555. Lastly, Phase IV will be the "Savannah-Ogeechee Canal Trail," and extend from South Carolina to Richmond Hill, Georgia, and is estimated to cost approximately \$9,464,455.

### **Funding Sources**

According to the testimony of Mr. Paul DeNard from the Office of the Chief Engineer at the Georgia Department of Transportation, the total project cost estimate for Coastal Georgia Greenway is \$60 million. Thus, the most prevalent issue in Committee discussions concerning the implementation of the Coastal Georgia Greenway is its funding. Testimony at both meetings discussed possible funding options, such as various federal funding and state budget appropriations. Ms. Katelyn DiGioia, the State Bicycle and Pedestrian Engineer of the Georgia Department of Transportation, discussed several federal funding options at the first Committee meeting, including: Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery Discretionary Grant (TIGER) program; Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP); National Highway Performance Program (NHPP); Surface Transportation Program (STP); Recreational Trails Program (RTP); Federal Lands Access Program (FLAP); and State and Community Highway Safety Grant Program. Ms. Jane Love, representing the Transportation sector of the Coastal Regional Metropolitan Planning Organization, explained the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) within the Surface Transportation Program at the second Committee meeting. Ms. Love explained that on- and off-road bicycle pedestrian facilities are an eligible type of project for this type of funding, which includes the Coastal Georgia Greenway. Projects eligible for TAP funding are competitively selected.

Ms. Becky Kelley, from the Parks, Recreation, and Historic Sites Division at the Department of Natural Resources, also testified at the second Committee meeting that the Recreational Trails Program is a funding option for the Coastal Georgia Greenway, as it provides funds to the states to develop and maintain recreational trails and trail-related facilities for non-motorized and motorized recreational trail uses.

### **Relevant Regulations and Permits**

At the second Committee meeting, several regulatory requirements and permits were discussed that must be adhered to during the implementation of the Coastal Georgia Greenway. Ms. Mary Walker from the Environmental Protection Division at the Department of Natural Resources testified at the second Committee meeting, explaining the applicable land regulations pertaining to construction of the Coastal Georgia Greenway. Mr. Karl Burgess, also from the Department of Natural Resources, represents the agency's Coastal Resources Division, and was also in attendance at the second Committee meeting. Mr. Burgess testified, explaining the Coastal Marshlands Protection Act, which requires a permit for any project which involves removing, filling, dredging, draining, or otherwise altering any marshlands. These permits and regulations must be acquired and adhered to during the implementation process.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recognizing the economic, health, recreational, and environmental benefits of the Coastal Georgia Greenway, the Committee recommends its implementation and construction in four phases over the next ten years, beginning in St. Marys and ending in Savannah.
- The Committee recommends that the Coastal Regional Commission, as the area's regional development commission, head and otherwise oversee the implementation of the Coastal Georgia Greenway, in collaboration with the Georgia Department of Transportation, Department of Natural Resources, and Coastal Georgia Greenway, Inc. The Coastal Regional Commission will be charged with the following powers and duties:
  - Creating a plan to implement the Coastal Georgia Greenway trail, including securing the necessary funding for the project over the next ten years. The Georgia Department of Transportation, Department of Natural Resources, and Coastal Georgia Greenway, Inc. will assist the Coastal Regional Commission in researching and securing funding; and
  - Filing an annual report, due by January 15<sup>th</sup> of each year, with the first report due by January 15, 2017. The Coastal Regional Commission must submit the report detailing their annual progress to: the Governor, the Lieutenant Governor, the Speaker of the House, and the members of the Coastal Delegation of which the Coastal Georgia Greenway passes. The report must also be submitted to the Commissioners of the following departments: the Georgia Department of Transportation, the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Community Affairs, Department of Economic Development, and Coastal Georgia Greenway, Inc.
- The Committee recommends the following funding sources to support the completion and maintenance of the Coastal Georgia Greenway:
  - Annual appropriations should be made for the next ten years to assist with the startup and implementation costs of the Coastal Georgia Greenway. Specifically, the Committee recommends that the House of Representatives and Senate appropriate at least \$1 million dollars annually for the next ten years to contribute to the Coastal Georgia Greenway.
  - State governmental authorities should work with local governments to secure funding from public and private sources for the Coastal Georgia Greenway.
  - The Coastal Regional Commission should also work with counties and municipalities in the region to secure local funding sources for the Coastal Georgia Greenway.
  - Additionally, on an annual basis, the Georgia Department of Transportation and Department of Natural Resources are encouraged to identify any excess funding which could be diverted to the development of the Coastal Georgia Greenway.
- Also, the Committee recommends, to the extent possible, that the Coastal Georgia Greenway be designed to meet the criteria of the East Coast Greenway; therefore, the Committee recommends that the Coastal Georgia Greenway be constructed with a minimum of 80 percent off-road trail and/or side path.
- Lastly, the Committee recommends that the Georgia Department of Transportation examine their current project list to identify any existing projects along the proposed route of the Coastal Georgia Greenway which could be expanded to include the construction of segments of the Coastal Georgia Greenway.

Respectfully Submitted,

**THE JOINT COASTAL GREENWAY STUDY COMMITTEE**

*William T. Ligon Jr.*

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**Senator William Ligon – Co-Chair**  
District 3

*Ron Stephens*

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**Representative Ron Stephens – Co-Chair**  
District 164