

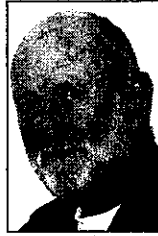
VIEW FROM THE BEACH

The mission of Bell Bouy project is no longer clear

It was a grand plan carefully, slowly produced months before the public notice. Weldon and Glenita "Gwen" Bell were ready to retire. A farmer from Lodge had come to Edisto Beach 40 years before and became the humorous and generous eccentric who made change with two-dollar bills and gave away much of his fish bycatch. Weldon was not well received by the beach at first, but "when you're told you can't do something, it makes you more determined," he said on his way to becoming a shrimp industry icon.

When the trusting Bells were ready to retire, a developer made them an offer they almost accepted before something told them to get an appraisal. When the appraisal came in much higher than the offer, the deal fell through, opening the door to a real deal: donate the \$1.5 million difference to the town, and sell it for the original \$4 million offered by the developer.

The Bells' idea worked. Then-Town Administrator Linda Woods, with Mayor Burley Lyons and past Councilman Archie Johnston, put together the project with innovative financing; a mix of government



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agencies.

Among them: the S.C. Seafood Alliance; Lowcountry Tourism Commission; U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service; S.C. National Heritage Corridor; Colleton County; Edisto Chamber of Commerce; Colleton County Economic Alliance; S.C. Trust for Public Land; Lowcountry Council of Governments; Edisto Beach Property Owners Association; and the Edisto Island Open Land Trust, to name a few.

The value of the project was also immediately recognized by local public support. As a place of public access in perpetuity, the Bell property would become Edisto Beach's sole, small spot making a huge contribution to the public welfare. As an assembly place for the com-

grants, general obligation bonds, ATAX tourism promotion funds and volunteer help. At the public hearing to present the plan, enthusiasm and support spanned dozens of

community it would aid travel and tourism promotion, economic development, arts and culture, education, historical preservation and conservation.

The May 9, 2006 meeting drew 69 attendees and only three posed questions. The project then moved quickly. By year's end, the site had been appraised, arrangements made with DHEC for cleanup of the site, and application made for a S.C. Conservation Bank \$2 million grant which was quickly awarded a month later. In October another meeting for public input was held and, on Nov. 7, 2006, the community voted to approve a General Obligation Bond "not to exceed \$3,700,000," which was later reduced by a million dollars.

On Jan. 11, 2007 another public hearing was held and final approval was given to the bond ordinance. The project, now popularly recognized as the Bell Seafood Park, had been overwhelmingly, publicly endorsed statewide. But human nature seldom allows unanimity. There are always those unhappy with something, for reasons often hidden deep in their disparity, their motives for manipulations unknown.

Why would suddenly, after

four years of effort in the public interest by so many, and two years of leadership by one of the most respected and beloved members of the community, would a trio of politicians relatively new to the scene — two of them hardly dry behind the ears — want to remove that leader? Were benign declarations of cohesiveness and support for the Bell Buoy Park, and their campaign promises to work for the town's best interests, now obvious, empty cynicism?

With politicians in general being regarded in polls at any level as slithering at the bottom of the food chain, is it possible there is community treachery yet to be discovered in the firing of a beloved community leader? One who took within her psyche the Bell Buoy Park as "her baby," but now will not be allowed to carry it to term by an unbelievably messy involuntary abortion?

There are clues to be followed next week and into the future.

A former Edisto Beach Town Council's reviled "3-2 Syndrome" has been renewed, amazingly with the same

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More facts to come next week

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developers involved. The trio who came out of the closet in last week's fiasco have revealed themselves as well as an upside: scores of constituents, outraged by the firing and seeking answers. But hidden agendas

are seldom revealed by those holding them. Next week in this space the Bell Buoy Tragedy will have some of its cover ripped off, its people and their programs examined ...

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