



Hilton Head (SC) REALTORS® Partner With Mayor for Balanced Land Management

In the lovely resort town of Hilton Head, South Carolina, the natural environment is carefully protected, and the built environment is subject to strict regulations (no neon signs, for example, and no buildings over five stories high.) The 39,000 residents like it that way – so do the 2.5 million annual tourists.

It is a community where people live by choice, after all, and they zealously preserve its natural assets by practicing beach re-nourishment and other deliberate environmental safeguards. They have never wanted the island to look commercialized. But its low-key commercial areas were in need of ‘polishing,’ according to Jean Beck, Executive Vice President of the 850-member Hilton Head Area Association of REALTORS® (HHAOR.) “This is actually a very young town: it was only incorporated in the 80’s,” she explains. “Our Land Management Ordinance was cobbled together piecemeal over the years, without a truly coherent vision where commercial property was concerned. It hadn’t been reviewed in 20 years, and it was so restrictive and convoluted that no one could do any of the necessary polishing.”

When the new mayor made it clear last year that a review of the Land Management Ordinance (LMO) was a top priority, the HHAOR cheered the news. Beck and her President met with the mayor and secured his agreement to put a commercial REALTOR® on the committee overseeing the review. They chose David Bachelder, Sr., a seasoned professional who has been on the island for over 25 years, and knows the ins-and-outs of its culture and its properties. “David brings real value to the committee,” says Beck, “he recognized that it was not a little ad hoc committee we were asking him to join. We basically signed him up for a part-time job!”

The LMO Review Committee realized they needed professional help to do the job right, and hired a consultant – which would cost \$15,000 more than the town had budgeted for the project. Beck had been aware of the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® Smart Growth Grant program, and applied for one. At the HHAOR membership luncheon at the beginning of the year, Board President John Robinson was delighted to present the resulting check for \$5,000 to the Mayor of Hilton Head Island. “He was thrilled,” she says, “and told us how much easier it would be to raise the remaining \$10,000, with our funds in hand. The town is really grateful that we stepped up to the plate, and they’ll come and talk to us about how the review is progressing – and all sorts of issues – now that we’ve shown this kind of commitment.”

The whole LMO review and rewrite process will take about two years, and HHAOR plans to use the NAR’s Land Use Initiative for a free legal review, once complete.

Already, they are seeing some glimmers of progress. “One little piece of the re-write that was just completed will enhance REALTORS® ability to market and brand their signage,” notes Beck. “Until now, all signs had to adhere to the town’s graphic regulations governing everything, including color. It was very hard for a casual observer to know what houses were for sale. Then again, it *did* force people to contact REALTORS® for help – so it wasn’t all bad! But it’s good to have options.”



At the end of the day, she continues, the LMO rewrite will simplify the process of attracting business to Hilton Head. “Our goal is to save all the good elements of the LMO, but to achieve some balance. We want to maintain the quality of life here, which is based on our pristine natural environment. But the commercial buildings are, frankly, *tired*, and owners need the ability – the permission – to renovate as necessary.” Smoothing the path for businesses and attracting new ones will keep the economy going, whether they’re technology based, or medical, or retirement ventures, or individual telecommuters.

“It won’t be opening the door for roller coasters and Ferris wheels,” promises Beck, “that’s not who we are.”



From left to right:
Hilton Head Board President John Robinson; REALTORS® Tom Crews, Karen Ryan and David Bachelder, Sr.; and Mayor Drew Laughlin.