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Taking a stand for heritage: Town eyes incentive for businesses to build places for basketmakers

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Mount Pleasant Town Council's Economic Development Committee is working on a plan that would encourage new commercial developments to annex into town and preserve the area's heritage.

Committee members recently discussed recommending a new ordinance that would discount developer's transportation impact fees along the Sweetgrass Basket Maker Highway if developers build a wooden sweetgrass basket stand on their property.



Photo by Jessica Miller

Mount Pleasant Town Council has been discussing a new rule that would give developers a \$5,000 to \$10,000 transportation impact fee credit if they build basket stands on their property along U.S. Highway 17 north of the Isle of Palms connector and to the edge of town.



Photo by Jessica Miller

Mount Pleasant Town Council hopes to give developers incentives to build basket stands on their property and require them to be responsible for maintaining them in an overlay district along U.S. Highway 17.

The option would be available to new businesses in a proposed overlay district along U.S. Highway 17, which is scheduled to go from four to six lanes north of the Isle of Palms connector.

Town Councilman Paul Gawrych said it also may encourage those building on Charleston County land to annex into Mount Pleasant. Business owners say it's usually cheaper to open a business in the county because builders do not have to pay a transportation impact fee, he said.

Under the proposed ordinance, the stands would be placed on private property, evading the possible danger of setting up directly along the roadway.

Stand owners now are allowed to occupy stands in the highway right of way. And people going to stands pull off the highway onto the shoulder. When the highway is expanded, however, a curb will be added, blocking the shoulder.

Maps of the proposed route posted in the former information center for Highway 17 road construction, the former CVS building, show access points along the route and the addition of driveways and streets that would allow safe routes to current stands.

Ed Barbee, Mount Pleasant's road construction information officer, said the new ordinance would make the roadside stands safer.

If the new stands were built on business property, buyers and sellers simply could pull into a parking lot similar to what has been done at Mount Pleasant Towne Centre.

Councilwoman Thomasena Stokes-Marshall also a member of the Sweetgrass Cultural Arts Festival Board, suggested that developers' stands resemble those at Towne Centre.

The plan calls for developers' stands to be approved by staff.

Christiane Farrell, planning division chief, said developers would be expected to construct a traditional basket stand that couldn't be built out of brick, she said.

And Michael Allen, coordinator of the Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor Commission, said the Towne Centre stands are a good model.

About 60 sweetgrass basket stands can be found along the highway in Mount Pleasant. Just a handful are occupied on any given day.

Driving north on Highway 17, Allen said, he's seen stands along the road in Georgetown, McClellanville and Awendaw. And driving south, he's spotted a few stands around St. Helena and Beaufort. But the majority of stands always have been in Mount Pleasant.

"This is the heart of basket making in America," Allen said.

Basket weavers living in other areas of the Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor, which extends from Wilmington, N.C., to Jacksonville, Fla., have roots in Mount Pleasant and simply migrated, Allen said.

Mount Pleasant's remaining stands appear to be on undeveloped private property and in front of basketmaker's homes, according to a map showing the placement of current stands. A few are set up outside businesses and churches.

The proposed overlay district would begin at Venning Road and run to corporate town limits, which extend to Bulls Bay Boulevard in Awendaw.

Town Council has discussed impact fee credits of \$5,000 to \$10,000 per stand. Transportation impact fees vary depending on land use. Some businesses pay 70 cents to \$15 per square foot. For example, a movie theater might pay \$50 per seat. Developers would be allowed two stands each in the ordinance's current draft.

Local basketmaker Henrietta Snype wasn't aware of the proposal but said she liked the idea of preserving basket stands and increasing safety on the highway.

"Mount Pleasant is the home for the basket," Snype said.

The Mount Pleasant Economic Development Committee plans to continue discussion of the issue at its upcoming meeting in April.

That's about the time people will see construction begin on the highway expansion north of the Isle of Palms connector, said Paul Lykins, Mount Pleasant transportation engineer.

Contractors plan to begin with the Interstate 526 overpass near Hungryneck Boulevard and then start the widening Highway 17. The project is expected to take two years.

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