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## 4 firms seek job to analyze Weehaw costs n County Council members review qualifications of potential consultants.

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Copper Station Holdings plans to develop the 5,216-acre Weehaw Tract, an area that will likely change the nature of Georgetown County forever.

Because of the potential for such massive change, Georgetown County Council has decided to hire a consulting firm.

During a four-hour meeting Tuesday, Council members heard from four firms.

The companies presented their qualifications. One of them will be contracted to conduct an analysis of the economic impact on the county.

The Moore Business School of the University of South Carolina, Clemson Institute for Economic and Community Development, Miley Gallo Associates and A T M/Clarion each had 45 minutes to tell why they would do the best job.

No vote was taken, but Council members were clearly impressed with ATM/Clarion.

They authorized County Administrator Tommy Edwards and purchasing officer Kyle Prufer to negotiate a contract with one of the four firms.

The Weehaw Tract, north of the City of Georgetown along U.S. Highway 701 and S.C. Highway 51, and west of town near U.S. Highways 521/17A, is about 13 percent larger than the city. At projected build-out, there would be 9,770 dwelling units with a population estimated to be from 25,000 to 30,000 people.

During several meetings and public hearings on the rezoning request for the Weehaw Tract, numerous speakers have voiced concerns about its impact on the county.

Many of the comments have centered on the impact of traffic, need for various public services and who would pay for the building and ongoing operation of those services.

Under an ordinance passed about 2002, County Council decided to allow but not require developers of tracts of land 50 acres or larger to present a development agreement. The document for Copper Station is the first one Council has received.

Representatives of Copper Station Holdings acknowledge that the county will likely seek changes. The consultant that County Council selects from Tuesday's meetings will advise Council on a variety of issues facing the county.

There will be at least two public hearings on the development agreement, which County Council will conduct as a whole.

These hearings are separate from the meetings and public hearings conducted by the county Planning Commission on the rezoning request for the Weehaw Tract.

Who's going to pay

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During all of the meetings, little opposition has come forth to the Weehaw Tract being developed.

Questions have mostly been asked about traffic and about who will pay the cost

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of the development, especially the infrastructure.

That's the reason for the economic analysis. County council members want to be sure that as roads, public safety services, parks, libraries and schools are built to serve the new homes, existing taxpayers don't have to foot the bill.

Right now, the county does not charge any sort of impact fee.

Midway Fire/EMS has such a fee, and Georgetown County Water and Sewer District charges a tap-on fee, but that's about it.

Several of the consultants said that impact fees as such are not allowed for most uses. However, developers may agree to pay a voluntary fee per lot. Those funds would be used to offset the cost of such things as recycling centers, police or sheriff's offices, fire/EMS stations, and perhaps roads, schools and the like.

Tony Maglione is an engineer with ATM (Applied Technology and Management).

He's already working with the county on its stormwater ordinance.

An engineer needs to be involved to help economists figure out what infrastructure costs, he said.

#### Near Savannah

Maglione and Craig Richardson of Clarion are also working with the City of Hardeeville and Jasper County as part of a team that is dealing with Copper Station Holdings and its proposed 7,500-acre tract in that community along I-95 near Savannah, Ga.

It's good that Council is looking at some of these concerns beforehand, Maglione said.

"You're defining your quality of life to the citizens of the county."

As Council looks at the development agreement that Copper Station has presented for the Weehaw Tract, he continued, it needs to consider the value of any contributions to the county.

So far, Copper Station has agreed to donate about 86 acres for public uses.

Some say that's not enough.

"What you do here is going to set a precedent for others down the road,"

Maglione said.

Richardson added that it's important to take a comprehensive and multi-disciplinary approach.

"The fiscal impact is just one piece of the puzzle," he said. Land use and design, engineering and regulatory and legal issues also have to be considered.

"We are negotiating five or six development agreements right now in Jasper County and Hardeeville," he said.

That city, well-known as a stop just a few miles inside South Carolina from the Savannah River, has a current population of about 2,200 people. Over the past few months, Jasper County has ceded its planning authority to the city.

Hardeeville has approved a 6,000-acre West Argent Tract and a 7,000-acre East Argent Tract. Both have been annexed into the city. It's also negotiating three more large developments totaling 12,100 acres.

The city will grow from about 1.2 square miles to about 40 square miles, if all 25,100 acres of proposed developments are approved and annexed.

#### Potential land sales

As many Georgetown residents know, International Paper Co. has reorganized itself and is working to restructure its business. The company owns 101,000 acres of land in Georgetown County, and more than 600,000 acres in South Carolina.

"What happened was, IP sold 27,000 acres in one afternoon," Maglione said.

That includes a significant portion of the land that is now part of Hardeeville.

Whenever Georgetown County considers the current or any future development agreement, it has to face several key issues.

One of those is the economic and fiscal impact to public infrastructure, county resources and levels of service.

How to verify developer capabilities and capital costs is another.

The county also has to coordinate the provision of public infrastructure with the timing of development.

It's not a good idea to spend millions on a new school or roads when houses aren't yet occupied, for instance.

Georgetown County also needs to set the amount and timing of developer fees, land set-asides, exactions, donations and other aspects of development agreements, Maglione said.

Another important area is land use and the quality of life, not only for the development but for nearby areas.

"One of the elements we have here," County Council Chairman Sel Hemingway said, "and I'm sure it's the same in Hardeeville, is that Copper Station is not to be the ultimate developer." It's no secret that the company plans to resell the land to others who will develop the 30 residential, nine commercial and five village commercial parcels.

Hemingway wanted to know of each of the consulting firms, whether it would be able to utilize growth trends to help Georgetown County figure out what the residential and commercial components would look like.

Yes, Maglione said.

In Jasper County and Hardeeville, it appears that at current prices a house costing about \$180,000 will generate enough property tax revenue to offset the costs to local government for infrastructure.

The development agreements there require a review every five years to make sure that property tax revenue continues to be sufficient. If not, there are means to renegotiate developer fees.

"There are a number of concession I would put on the developer to make sure of economic viability," Maglione said.

Richardson added that data on growth, trends, demographics and other factors are available.

"Commercial is a better revenue generator," Maglione said, "but it does bring additional traffic.

"We know Mr. (Gerald) Peterson (owner of Copper Station). He doesn't build; he flips. You want to give him the flexibility to build."

It's important that any developer be allowed to make a profit, Maglione continued. That helps the county and helps the developer and the new residents.

## Charrettes

"You want to be developer friendly, you want them in the community, but you want to watch out for the people," he said.

Hemingway also asked each consultant what they thought about having a charrette, which is directed public planning process.

Miley and Gallo seemed receptive to the idea, the two university-based consultants were lukewarm to the idea, and ATM/Clarion are against a charrette. "Charrettes tend to be one-sided, anti-developer," Maglione said. "That's why you bring experts on board, to advise you."

While the Tuesday meeting was held to consider the qualifications of each consultant, Hemingway asked about prices for other projects. The range for similar work in other localities was from about \$20,000 to as much as \$100,000. Time frame for doing an economic analysis stretched from about six weeks to close to six months.

Once the consultants completed their presentations, Council members discussed them.

David Hood said he felt they were all qualified to do the work. Always a fiscal conservative, he suggested that his fellow Council members weigh the costs carefully.

Other Council members agreed with Hood's sentiments, but also said it's important to make sure the development agreement is done right.

They expect to vote on a contract with one of the consulting firms at the Oct. 25 meeting of Council.

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