



## Editorial: Land purchases missed opportunity for regional plan

Harry Hallman  
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I have been asked several times over the past week what I thought about the Charleston Park and Recreation Commission's (PRC) purchase of the Long Savannah and Harmony Hall properties.

First, I'm sure the properties have conservation value to the county, and I have no problem with it being considered for purchase.

Second, while I'm not an appraiser, I do think there are reasonable questions about the per-acre value given the amount of wetlands involved in the purchases, which, by my understanding, are currently protected, for all intents and purposes, by state and federal regulations.

Third, I do think Charleston Mayor Joe Riley did a great job behind the scenes getting the PRC Board and the County Council to commit almost half of the PRC budget to protect his southern boundary. I think a commitment of almost half of the PRC's open-space budget on two properties without any discussion with Mount Pleasant or North Charleston is out of balance, but, nevertheless, I congratulate Mayor Riley. I just hope the PRC Board and County Council will give us as much consideration in the future.

Fourth, it concerns me that while the land in question has conservation value, I'm not sure exactly how it will serve more than 300,000 county residents as a park. I believe in conservation, but I believe more in public accessibility, and that does not mean a few trails located miles from three-quarters of the county's population. Let's not forget who is paying taxes to allow these properties to be purchased.

I believe we need more balance in the decision making process in terms of where these large purchases are located and, more importantly, more discussion regarding the purpose of these purchases. Our urban and suburban families should benefit from the large amount of open-space money by having a proportionate share of parks located with reasonable

proximity to population centers. In such cases, we may be talking about several 50 acre parks instead of 1,000 acre parks. I can tell you that is what our citizens expect from PRC.

PRC should be about purchasing property for the purpose of building parks, not for the purpose of protecting land. There is a conservation bank fund already set aside for the purpose of protecting land.

Fifth, the county and PRC need to get together. Who is going to be in charge of deciding the purchase of open space in Charleston County? I'm not sure what is going on, but it is clear that there is less than the desired amount of teamwork and single purpose direction at present between the two bodies, and for that matter just among PRC members.

I used to think the PRC was a great system for providing general open space and leisure services from a countywide perspective, but I'm not so sure anymore. At the same time, if County Council is going to run this thing, then council members need to cast their votes. That is why they were put there. Just because a member does not have all the facts or because the member is friends with someone connected to the process is not a good reason to give up the member's vote. If I refused to vote on an issue every time a friend was involved, I may never cast another vote in Mount Pleasant.

Finally, I think a lot more thought should have gone into this process. I realize land sales come up very quickly, and time seems to be of the essence, but that is why the county and area municipalities have eminent domain authority. I also would have looked at multiple properties for possible purchase before a vote was taken to spend \$16 million on only two pieces. Ideally, the county and PRC would have met with representatives from all major jurisdictions and compiled a list of possible properties, and only then would they have begun the purchase process.

Since that opportunity has been lost, I can only hope that the PRC board and County Council will now give attention to North Charleston and Mount Pleasant regarding our desire to offer viable and accessible open space and park opportunities to the citizens from our respective areas. North Charleston and Mount Pleasant combined represent more than half the population of Charleston County. Our citizens will pay at least half of the taxes necessary to fund the PRC open-space fund. I hope those involved will remember this.

Harry Hallman is mayor of Mount Pleasant.

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