

PLANNING COMMISSION

STAFF REPORT

Growth Management Department



MEETING DATE:	April 23, 2025
PROJECT:	<p>ANNX-02-25-019605 by the Applicant and Property Owner, Beaufort County School District. A request for annexation of Certain Real Property Contiguous to the Town of Bluffton's Corporate Boundaries Consisting of a Total of 24.12 Acres, More or Less, Located at 1105 Bluffton Parkway and Bearing Beaufort County Tax Map Nos. R600 029 000 011A 0000, R600 029 000 1736 0000 and R600 029 000 0034 0000 into the Town of Bluffton corporate limits – Public Hearing and Recommendation to Town Council</p> <p>ZONE-02-25-019606 by the Applicant and Property Owner, Beaufort County School District. A request for Zoning Map Amendment for approximately 77.93 Acres, More or Less, consisting of the 24.12 Acres, More or Less, Located at 1105 Bluffton Parkway and Bearing Beaufort County Tax Map Nos. R600 029 000 011A 0000, R600 029 000 1736 0000 and R600 029 000 0034 0000 which are Under Consideration for Annexation and currently zoned as T2-Rural (T2R) as well as those Adjacent Properties Consisting of the 53.731 Acres, More or Less, Located at 3050 River Ridge Drive and Bearing Beaufort County Tax Map Nos. R610 029 000 0012 0000, R610 029 000 0084 0000, R610 029 000 1780 0000, and R610 029 000 0612 0000 which are Within the Town's Corporate Boundary and Currently Zoned as Residential General (RG), to Rezone Said Parcels to the Preserve (PR) District Pursuant to the Unified Development Ordinance – Public Hearing and Recommendation to Town Council</p>
PROJECT MANAGER:	Kevin P. Icard, AICP Director of Growth Management

REQUEST: Town Staff requests that Planning Commission hold Public Hearings and vote to forward recommendations to Town Council for the following:

1. A request for annexation of Certain Real Property Contiguous to the Town of Bluffton's Corporate Boundaries Consisting of a Total of 24.12 Acres, More or Less, Located at 1105 Bluffton Parkway and Bearing Beaufort County Tax Map Nos. R600 029 000 011A 0000, R600

029 000 1736 0000 and R600 029 000 0034 0000 into the Town of Bluffton corporate limits; and

2. A request for Zoning Map Amendment for approximately 77.93 Acres, More or Less, consisting of the 24.12 Acres, More or Less, Located at 1105 Bluffton Parkway and Bearing Beaufort County Tax Map Nos. R600 029 000 011A 0000, R600 029 000 1736 0000 and R600 029 000 0034 0000 which are Under Consideration for Annexation and currently zoned as T2-Rural (T2R) as well as those Adjacent Properties Consisting of the 53.731 Acres, More or Less, Located at 3050 River Ridge Drive and Bearing Beaufort County Tax Map Nos. R610 029 000 0012 0000, R610 029 000 0084 0000, R610 029 000 1780 0000, and R610 029 000 0612 0000 which are Within the Town's Corporate Boundary and Currently Zoned as Residential General (RG), to Rezone Said Parcels to the Preserve (PR) District Pursuant to the Unified Development Ordinance ("UDO").

INTRODUCTION: On February 24, 2025, and as amended on March 19, 2025, in accordance with Section 5-3-150 of the Code of Laws of South Carolina and the *Town of Bluffton Annexation Policy and Procedure Manual* ("Annexation Manual"), the property owner, Beaufort County School District, submitted a 100% Annexation Petition Application for three parcels totaling 24.12 acres located 1105 Bluffton Parkway ("Property") into the Town of Bluffton's municipal boundary (Attachment 1 & 4).

Pursuant to the Annexation Manual, the Applicant initially submitted a concurrent Zoning Map Amendment application requesting the Properties to be zoned Residential General as regulated by the Unified Development Ordinance.

Per the Annexation Manual, the initial step in the public review process was an initial briefing, or "intent to annex" with Town Council for general discussion of the request and its associated applications such as the appropriate zoning classification and possible negotiation items. Town Council unanimously accepted this annexation at their March 11, 2025, meeting; however, they directed staff to work with the Applicant to determine how the properties could be zoned without entitling any Residential rights.

Staff determined that with a text amendment to the UDO to allow Schools by-right in the Preserve Zoning District, that the properties could move forward with a school and all ancillary uses associated with a school on the property while not allowing for the ability to have residential entitlements. The UDO Administrator has initiated a separate Zoning Text Amendment (ZONE-03-25-019653) to update Table 4.3 Uses by District to include the use of "Schools" as a permitted by-right use in the Preserve Zoning District.

The School District has updated their Zoning Map Amendment Application to include the two parcels that currently make up the River Ridge Academy campus requesting that all Properties are zoned Preserve (PR) (Attachments 2-5).

BACKGROUND: The Properties that are part of the annexation request contains approximately 24.12 acres located within Unincorporated Beaufort County as shown on the Vicinity Map in the Application (Attachment 1). The Property contains a single-family house but is otherwise vacant. There is an approximately 4.3 acre pond on the property that was a former borrow pit.

The Property is currently zoned T2-Rural (T2R) which is intended to preserve the rural character of Beaufort County. This Zone applies to areas that consist of sparsely settled lands in an open or cultivated state. It may include large lot residential, farms where animals are raised or crops are grown, parks, woodland, grasslands, trails, and open space areas. The T2 Rural Zone implements the Comprehensive Plan goals of preserving the rural character of portions of Beaufort County.

Beaufort County Current Zoning District. Property is currently zoned as T2 Rural (T2R), allows a very limited mix of residential and commercial uses such as:

- | | |
|---|----------------------------------|
| 1. Single Family Residential (0.34 DU/Acre) | 12. Mining & Resource Extraction |
| 2. Family Compound | 13. Gasoline Service Stations |
| 3. Group Home | 14. Civic |
| 4. Home Business | 15. Church |
| 5. Cottage Industry | 16. Agriculture |
| 6. General Retail 3,500 SF or Less | 17. Recreation |
| 7. Gas Station/Fuel Sales | 18. Ecotourism |
| 8. Animal Services: Kennel | 19. Safety |
| 9. Day Care: Family Home (up to 8 clients) | 20. Public Assembly |
| 10. Lodging: Short-Term Housing Rental (STHR) | 21. Infrastructure |
| 11. Lodging: Inn (up to 24 rooms) | 22. Transportation |
| | 23. Communications |

Under current Beaufort County zoning, a school is not an allowed use.

The Applicant has requested the Town's Preserve (PR) Zoning District as part of the concurrent Zoning Map Amendment which allows a very limited development and mainly civic type uses such as:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------|
| 1. Agricultural Use and Structures | 5. Parks |
| 2. Campgrounds and RV Parks | 6. Museum |
| 3. Recreation Facility | 7. Utilities |
| 4. Government Building | |

While the use of a school is not currently permitted in the Preserve Zoning District, the Town's UDO Administrator has initiated a UDO Text Amendment to include Schools as a use by-right. The Town of Bluffton defines a school as the following.

An education facility that provides regular daily classroom, lab or other similar learning environments for students, including activities, facilities and grounds accessory to education, including pre-, primary, secondary, vocational, and higher education institutions. Schools are broken into different scales of use based on context and the type of buildings permitted in the specific zoning district.

The immediately adjacent properties vary as to jurisdiction and zoning as follows:

Direction	Jurisdiction	Zoning District	Current Use
North	Town of Bluffton	Residential General (UDO)	BCSD – River Ridge Academy K-8 School – 3050 River Ridge Drive
South	Town of Bluffton	Buckwalter Planned Unit Development	Beaufort County – Bluffton Parkway - Road Right-of-Way
	Town of Bluffton	Buckwalter Planned Unit Development	Hampton Lake Community Association Inc. – No Address – Common Property
	Town of Bluffton	Buckwalter Planned Unit Development	Gohl Holdings LLC – No Address – Undeveloped
East	Beaufort County	T2 – Rural	Zakki LLC – 1125 Bluffton Parkway - Vacant
West	Beaufort County	T2 - Rural	Antoine Iskander– 51 Bufflehead Lane – Single Family Residence
	Beaufort County	T2 - Rural	Antonio Mercado – 65-69 Bufflehead Lane – Single Family Residences
	Beaufort County	T2 – Rural	Carolyn Theodore – 32-40 Hubbard Lane - Undeveloped
	Town of Bluffton	Residential General (UDO)	River Ridge Road – 3050 River Ridge Drive – Right-of-Way

The Applicant proposes (based on feedback provided by Town Council during the Intent to Annex presentation) that the property is zoned Preserve and that the adjacent River Ridge Academy parcels owned by Beaufort County School District are also rezoned to the Preserve Zoning District. The Property will serve as an expansion of the existing River Ridge Academy campus for education land use, athletic fields and/or the construction of an early childhood school. Annexation of the three parcels and rezoning of all parcels, including the existing River Ridge Academy campus parcels, to Preserve will permit the expansion of the school campus to occur. This rezoning will meet the Town Council intent of not entitling residential density on the property.

The Applicant does not have a specific plan for the Property but notes that current preliminary planning for this expanded area contemplates that the early childhood center will be constructed on either:

- (1) the Property to be annexed into the Town of Bluffton; or
- (2) the River Ridge campus athletic field owned by Beaufort County School District and currently within the Town of Bluffton. If the early childhood center is constructed on the existing athletic field, the athletic field will be relocated to the Property being annexed into the Town of Bluffton. The Property proposed for annexation will be a part of the River Ridge campus in some capacity.

Lastly, all future development of the Property would be required to be reviewed through the applicable Town of Bluffton planning processes including a Development Plan, Stormwater review and Building Permits.

ANALYSIS: The following is an analysis of the review for each application.

1. **ANNEXATION**

The Town of Bluffton Annexation Policy and Procedure Manual provides the following review criteria:

Town Staff, Planning Commission, and Town Council are required to consider the criteria set forth in the Town of Bluffton Annexation Policy and Procedure Manual (Annexation Manual) in assessing an application for an Annexation request.

a. **The application meets the principals, policies and procedures set forth in the Annexation Manual.**

Finding: Staff finds the annexation request meets the principals, policies and procedures to achieve orderly growth and develop a more cohesive and less fragmented Town Boundary as set forth in the Annexation Manual.

b. **The Annexation of the property is in the best interest of the Town and its citizens.**

Finding: Annexation of the Property into the Town of Bluffton will permit expansion of the River Ridge Academy campus and the construction of an early childhood center school to serve the growing educational needs of the Town of Bluffton.

c. **The Property has contiguity to the Town of Bluffton Municipal Boundary.**

Finding: The Property is contiguous to the Town of Bluffton's Municipal Boundary. Contiguity with the Town of Bluffton's municipal boundary is established through the adjacent parcels to the north, south and west of the Properties. The adjacent parcels to the south were annexed into the Town of Bluffton's municipal boundaries upon approval of the Buckwalter Annexation by Town Council Ordinance

2000-02 on April 19, 2000. Also the current River Ridge Academy was annexed into the Town by Town Ordinance 2014-03 on January 22, 2014.

d. **The Annexation avoids creating new enclaves (or donut holes) in the Town of Bluffton Municipal Boundary.**

Finding: The proposed annexation area is located in an area surrounded on three sides by the Town of Bluffton jurisdiction. Although the annexation will create a smaller donut hole to the north, this annexation will bring a large area of the current enclave into the Town of Bluffton, increasing contiguity for future annexations and conformance with Future Annexation Map.

e. **The Annexation is consistent with the recommendations of the Town of Bluffton Comprehensive Plan including the Future Annexation Map.**

Finding: The proposed zoning and education use for the Property are consistent with the Town's Comprehensive Plan, Future Annexation Area Map, and Future Land Use Map. The Property is located within the boundaries of the area shown on the Town's Future Annexation Area Map and within the areas of future Town growth shown on the Town's Future Land Use Map.

f. **The requested zoning district(s), land use regulations, development standards and environmental regulations is appropriate.**

Finding: Proposed as a standard, non-PUD Zoning District, the land use regulations, development standards, and environmental regulations set forth in the Unified Development Ordinance must be met. These requirements represent the current best management practices for development and environmental protection in the Town of Bluffton. As a result, this guideline is met.

g. **Consideration has been given to the costs, benefits and estimated revenues for a proposed annexation before action is taken on the petition.**

Finding: As a public agency the Beaufort County School District is exempt from paying taxes similar to the Town of Bluffton. Therefore there will not be any direct revenue generated for the Town. However, by having all schools that serve Bluffton residents, aside from Okatie Elementary, within the Town jurisdiction and zoned similarly there are operational efficiencies gained by both the Town and the Beaufort County School District. These efficiencies can be found in the provision of public safety, zoning, and development, and facilities management services. Although indirect, their savings are passed along to the tax payer.

h. **The Annexation will not create a tax burden or measurably reduce the level of service(s) provided to existing citizens and property owners.**

Finding: By constructing this new school the Beaufort County School District will be improving the availability and quality of public education service offered to the Bluffton community. Additionally, the Town of Bluffton is already providing services to surrounding properties and the services necessitated by the school do not negatively

impact existing services. As a result, the annexation will not create a tax burden or reduction in service levels.

i. **The Fiscal impact of providing municipal services has been considered.**

Finding: Development of the school within the Town of Bluffton will result in the Police Department placing an additional Class III School Resource Officer at the Early Childhood Center. If approved, the position will be funded through a State Grant (via the School District) and will be offset by the Beaufort County School District. The Cost Benefit Analysis for the proposed annexation is provided as Attachment 6.

j. **Consideration of the annexation area's existing condition of utilities, transportation, infrastructure and future needs for expansion improvements has been taken.**

Finding: The Property will be served by public water & sewer, electrical, telecommunications, and natural gas services are accessible, adjacent to, or are in close proximity for tie-in at time of development. With access to both Bluffton Parkway and Hampton Parkway, the site has sufficient transportation access. At the time of development, a Traffic Impact Analysis will be required. Additional transportation improvements maybe required at that time.

k. **The full impact that annexation will have on law enforcement has been considered.**

Finding: See criteria (i) above.

l. **The application demonstrates potential for the diversification of the economic base and job opportunities.**

Finding: The development of the properties as a new school offers new job opportunities for administration / management, professional, and service sector employees.

m. **Petitioners understand of all potential costs/benefits associated with annexation.**

Finding: As stated in the Applicant's narrative, they have analyzed the annexation and found that there are operational efficiencies associated with the annexation of these properties. The Cost Benefit Analysis for the proposed annexation is provided as Attachment 6.

n. **Input has been provided by the public and affected agencies during the review process.**

Finding: Letters from affected agencies can be found in the application packet. All agencies have stated they are able to serve the site and future development. Additionally, at the time of development this will be a Public Project and considered a Project of Regional Significance.

2. ZONING MAP AMENDMENT

Article 3, Section 3.4.3 of the Unified Development Ordinance provides the following review criteria:

- a. **Consistency with the *Comprehensive Plan* or, if conditions have changed since the *Comprehensive Plan* was adopted, consistency with the overall intent of the *Comprehensive Plan*, recent development trends and the general character of the area;**

Finding: The proposed amendments are consistent with the Comprehensive Plan based on the sections listed below.

- Section 7 – Land Use Objective L2.4, actionable item states the following, “Identify areas to accommodate needed community facilities, like schools, parks, and other public places.”
 - Beaufort County School District purchased the property in 2022 with anticipation of needing to expand the River Ridge Academy Campus.
- Section 9 – Community Facilities Objective F3.1, actionable item states the following, “ Work with the Beaufort County School District to plan for the location and size of new schools and the expansion of existing facilities.”
 - School District Staff approached Town of Bluffton Staff to discuss the possible annexation and zoning of the property to expand the campus.

- b. **Capability of the site’s physical, geological, hydrological and other environmental features to support the breadth and intensity of uses that could be developed in the proposed zoning district;**

Finding: The Property can support the breadth and intensity of uses permitted within the Preserve (PR) zoning district.

- c. **Compatibility of all the potential uses allowed in the proposed zoning district with surrounding uses and zoning districts in terms of suitability of location, impacts on the environment, noise, density, nature of use, traffic impacts, aesthetics, ability to develop adjacent properties under existing zoning, and potential influence on property values;**

Finding: The rezoning of the Property to Preserve (PR) is compatible with surrounding uses and zoning districts which are residential as well as institutional and civic. The anticipated civic use as a school is anticipated to have minimal impacts to the surrounding area. The existing campus is currently accessed at a controlled traffic light at River Ridge Road and Bluffton Parkway. The school uses the secondary access point off of Hampton Parkway for bus traffic.

- d. **Capacity of public infrastructure and services to sufficiently accommodate all potential uses allowed in the proposed district without compromising the public health, safety and welfare of the Town of Bluffton;**

Finding: Public health, safety and welfare is not compromised. The ability for the school district to expand provides additional capacity to serve the needs of the community.

e. **Public need for the potential uses permitted in the requested zoning district; and**

Finding: BCSD Facilities Plan identifies the need for an additional school in the Bluffton area to serve the growing school-age population. By annexing the properties into the Town, the school district can expand the campus to meet the needs of the community.

f. **Compliance with applicable requirements in the Applications Manual.**

Finding: The application has been reviewed by Staff and has been determined to be complete, meeting all requirements of the Applications Manual.

SCHEDULE: The proposed schedule for the applications is provided as Attachment 7.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Application Submittal
 - a. Annexation Application
 - b. Petition for Annexation
 - c. Vesting Deed
 - d. Surveys
 - e. Annexation Location Map
 - f. Annexation Narrative
 - g. Parcels to be Annexed
 - h. Existing River Ridge Academy
 - i. Zakki, LLC Property to the East
 - j. Parcel 8C, LLC Property and BCSD property to the South
 - k. Zoning and Parcel History Letter from Beaufort County
 - l. Zoning Map Amendment Application
2. Addendum to Annexation Narrative
3. Executed River Ridge Amended Petition for Annexation
4. Amended Annexation Application
5. Amended Zoning Map Amendment Application
6. Cost Benefit Analysis
7. Draft Schedule