

PLANNING COMMISSION

STAFF REPORT

Growth Management Department



MEETING DATE:	April 23, 2025
PROJECT:	Amendments to the Town of Bluffton's Municipal Code of Ordinances, Chapter 23, Unified Development Ordinance, Article 4 – Zoning Districts, Table 4.3 (Uses by District) to Add Schools as a Permitted Use in the Preserve (PR) Zoning District
PROJECT MANAGER:	Charlotte Moore, AICP Principal Planner

INTRODUCTION: As set forth in Section 3.5.2 of the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO), “an application for a UDO Text Amendment may be initiated by a Town of Bluffton property owner, Town Council, Planning Commission, or the UDO Administrator when public necessity, convenience, State or Federal law, general welfare, new research, or published recommendations on zoning and land development justifies such action.”

REQUEST: The UDO Administrator requests that the Planning Commission recommend approval to Town Council of an amendment to allow the School land use to be a Permitted Use within the Preserve (PR) zoning district.

BACKGROUND: On February 24, 2025, Beaufort County School District (“BCSD”) submitted a 100% Annexation Petition Application for two parcels (“Property”) totaling 24.1 acres located 1105 Bluffton Parkway for inclusion into the Town of Bluffton’s municipal boundary. The Property would serve as an expansion of the existing River Ridge Academy campus, located in Town limits, for education land use, athletic fields and/or the construction of an early childhood school. Related to the annexation petition is a proposal to rezone the Property to a Residential General (“RG”) zoning district.

The Property currently has a Beaufort County zoning designation of T2-Rural (“T2R”) which is intended to preserve the rural character of the county. The T2R district applies to areas that consist of sparsely settled lands in an open or cultivated state. It may include large-lot residential use, farms where animals are raised or crops are grown, parks, woodland, grasslands, trails, and open space areas, but does not allow schools. Therefore, annexation and rezoning of the property to match the existing River Ridge Academy campus parcels is sought by BCSD for the expansion of the school campus to occur. River Ridge Academy has an RG zoning designation.

The RG district is characterized as a predominately single-family residential of moderate density (up to four dwelling units per acre) that also permits civic/institutional uses, child care facilities and limited lodging uses.

At the March 11, 2025 Town Council meeting, the annexation application was presented for consideration. While receptive to the annexation request, Town Council expressed concern that the proposed RG district could allow residential development if the plans of BCSD should change and the property is sold. Therefore, an alternative Preserve (PR) zoning district was suggested for the Property.

The PR district “is intended to preserve and protect sensitive environmental areas, restrict development that could compromise these areas, and maintain open spaces that provide an ecological and aesthetic value to the community.” It allows limited land uses, including government buildings, parks, museums, and recreational facilities. While government buildings are permitted by-right, schools are not an allowed land use. Therefore, a text amendment is requested by the UDO Administrator to allow Schools within the PR district as a Permitted Use (below graphic).

Table 4.3 Uses by District												
	Preserve (PR)	Agricultural (AG)	Rural Mixed Use (RMU)	Residential General (RG)	Neighborhood Core (NC)	General Mixed Use (GM)	Light Industrial (LI)	Riverfront Edge Historic District (RV-HD)	Neighborhood Conservation Historic District (NCV-HD)	Neighborhood General Historic District (NG-HD)	Neighborhood Center Historic District (NCE-HD)	Neighborhood Core Historic District (NC-HD)
School	<u>P</u>	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P

REVIEW CRITERIA & ANALYSIS: When assessing an application for UDO Text Amendments, Town Council is required to consider the criteria set forth in UDO Section 3.5.3, Application Review Criteria. These criteria are provided below, followed by a Finding.

1. **Section 3.5.3.A.** Consistency with the Comprehensive Plan or, if conditions have changed since the Comprehensive Plan was adopted, consistency with the overall intent of the Plan, recent development trends and the general character of the area.

Finding. The proposed amendment is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan.

2. **Section 3.5.3.B.** Consistency with demographic changes, prevailing economic trends, and/or newly recognized best planning practices.

Finding. The proposed amendment would support BSCD's ability to provide additional educational services for the Town's youth.

3. **Section 3.5.3.C.** Enhancement of the health, safety, and welfare of the Town of Bluffton.

Finding. The proposed amendment supports the general welfare of the Town and its residents.

4. **Section 3.5.3.D.** Impact of the proposed amendment on the provision of public services.

Finding. The proposed amendment will have no effect on public services.

5. **Section 3.5.3.E.** The application must comply with the applicable requirements in the Applications Manual.

Finding. The application complies with all applicable requirements of the Applications Manual.

NEXT STEPS:

UDO Text Amendment Procedure	Date	Complete
Step 1. Planning Commission Public Hearing and Recommendation	April 23, 2025	✓
Step 2. Town Council – 1st Reading	May 13, 2025	✗
Step 3. Town Council Meeting – Final Reading and Public Hearing	June 10, 2025	✗

PLANNING COMMISSION ACTIONS: As granted by the powers and duties set forth in Sec. 2.2.6.C.4 of the UDO, the Planning Commission has the authority to take the following actions with respect to this application:

1. Approval of the application as submitted;
2. Approval of the application with amendments; or
3. Denial of the application as submitted by the Applicant.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: Growth Management Staff recommends the Planning Commission recommend approval of the proposed Text Amendment to Town Council as submitted.