

TOWN OF BLUFFTON



STAFF REPORT

Growth Management Department

MEETING DATE:	November 20, 2024
PROJECT:	Venture at Okatie Bluff Apartments: Architecture, Landscaping, Lighting Certificate of Appropriateness-Highway Corridor Overlay (COFA-HCO) NE Corner of SC Hwy 170 and Gibbet Road (Street Name TBD)
PROJECT MANAGER:	Charlotte Moore, AICP Principal Planner

APPLICATION REQUEST: The Applicant, Witmer Jones Keefer, on behalf of the property owner, Parcel 8A, LLC, requests that the Planning Commission approve the following application:

COFA-09-24-019322. A Certificate of Appropriateness-Highway Corridor Overlay (COFA-HCO) to allow the architecture, landscaping, and lighting for an apartment complex to include six (6) multi-family residential buildings with approximately 150 dwelling units, four (4) garage buildings, a clubhouse, amenities and associated infrastructure. The subject property consists of approximately 22.0 acres identified as Parcel R610 028 000 5419 0000, located approximately at the northeast corner of the intersection of SC Highway 170 and Gibbet Road, zoned Buckwalter PUD within the Parcel B-1 Master Plan of the Buckwalter Planned Unit Development. See Attachment 1 for Vicinity Map.

INTRODUCTION: The Concept Plan for the Buckwalter PUD was initially approved by Bluffton Town Council on April 19, 2000. As approved, the plan organized the PUD into planning areas or tracts to provide for the arrangement and regulation of land uses, as well as the allocation of residential densities. The subject parcel is in the Buckwalter Commons Planning Area. The Concept Plan and associated Development Agreement identify the allowed land uses within this area. The documents also prescribe the standards that govern all development within the Concept Plan, including the subject parcel. Such land uses and development standards are binding upon the Town and the Applicant.

The Final Development Plan (DP-10-23-018564) has been approved. Consistency between the COFA-HCO and Final Development Plan is required.

The Applicant is requesting approval of a Certificate of Appropriateness – Highway Corridor Overlay (COFA-HCO) application for a multi-family residential development (Attachment 2). The development plan was reviewed by the Development Review Committee on October 9, 2024 and comments are provided as Attachment 4. The COFA-HCO application is subject to review by the Planning Commission providing authority over the architectural, landscaping, and lighting elements only.

REVIEW CRITERIA & ANALYSIS: Town Staff and the Planning Commission are required to consider the criteria set forth in Section 3.17.3 of the Unified Development Ordinance in assessing an application for a COFA-HCO. These criteria are provided below followed by a Staff Finding based upon review of the application submittals to date.

1. **Section 3.17.3.A. The proposed development must be in conformance with applicable landscaping, lighting, and architectural provisions provided in Unified Development Ordinance Article 5, Design Standards.**
 - a) *Finding.* The design standards to be applied in the review were established by the PUD via the Beaufort County 1990/3 Zoning and Highway Corridor Overlay District (HCO) within of the Town of Bluffton Zoning and Development Standards Ordinance (BZDSO), approved September 1999 and modified June 2000. Therefore, the design criteria of Article 5 of the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) does not apply to this proposal with the exception of Section 5.3.3 (Tree Conservation) as a result of changes adopted by Town Council to UDO Section 5.10 (Stormwater) that affect existing PUDs.
2. **Section 3.17.3.B. The proposed development shall be in conformance with any approved Development Agreement, PUD Concept Plan, PUD Master Plan, Final Development Plan, Subdivision Plan, or any other agreements or plans that are applicable.**

The property is in the Buckwalter PUD and is in the Buckwalter Commons planning area. The property is subject to the Beaufort County 1990/3 Zoning and Highway Corridor Overlay District (HCO) within the Town of Bluffton Zoning and Development Standards Ordinance (BZDSO) and Design Guidelines which contain architectural, landscaping, and lighting standards for properties located in the HCO.

A. Buckwalter PUD/PUD Concept Plan

The Buckwalter PUD refers to the Beaufort County 1990/3 Zoning and Development Standards Ordinance (ZDSO) and The Town of Bluffton Zoning and Development Standards Ordinance (BZDSO) Highway Corridor Overlay District (HCO) for development standards. The application complies with the Buckwalter PUD/PUD Concept Plan except for the below items, which also includes applicable Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) requirements.

Architecture (See Attachment 5 for Architectural Plan)

The Planning Commission reviews elements of design, including form, mass, scale, proportion, height, texture, color, architectural style, individual architectural elements, [and] orientation or specific location upon the site. The Commission may require adjustments, and reasonable conditions may be attached to the approval. In the Applicant's narrative, the architecture is described as follows:

"Establishing a look that is consistent with the HCO and other nearby surrounding areas was taken in account when the project moved from a conceptual to design stage. The six apartment buildings, clubhouse and accessory buildings all use materials, such as, brick, fiber cement trim, fiber cement horizontal siding, fiber cement board and batten siding and metal rails to help achieve an innovative blend of what other structures provide in the HCO. Colors, roof types, overhang and balconies similar to the Lowcountry historic look and feel, but also the neighboring architecture, were all taken into account in designing the high quality structures."

Applying Sec. 4.24.3.A. (S.C. Highway 170/U.S. Highway 278 Corridor Overlay District, Architectural), findings include:

- 1) **Finding – Exterior Siding.** As stated in the DRC meeting comments regarding the ground floor, brick siding is to be extended to the second floor on all apartment building elevations where a combination of brick and cementitious board were shown. Previously, only the front elevation showed brick cladding for the ground floor. The response of the Applicant was to lower the brick on the front elevation. The combination of two siding materials for the ground floor is incongruous and creates a two and one-half story expanse of vertical panel siding that prevents a clear division between the first and second floors. Further, the ground floor use of brick will help to reduce the perceived height of each building. (Sec. 4.24.3.A.3.d.)
- 2) **Finding – Long Facades.** Long, unarticulated or blank facades are inappropriate exterior elements (Sec. 4.24.3.A.3.c.). The Commission may wish to consider whether the rear façades of the apartment buildings (A1, A2 and B and C) are sufficiently articulated to reduce the perceived mass. While there is variation in the roof line, the rear elevations are lacking dimensional elements except for a minimal wall projection. Perceptible offsets, recesses, and/or awnings can create visual interest to break up the flatness of these elevations. All apartment building elevations can be seen in Attachment 3.
- 3) **Finding – Screening Mechanical Equipment.** All trash receptacles, dumpsters, ductwork, fixed operating machinery, and other such utility equipment shall either be screened from view or located so that they are not visible from the highway (Sec. 4.24.4.A. Further, Sec. 4.24.3.A.3. states that architectural details resulting in a clearly disturbing appearance are inappropriate. The mechanical equipment proposed on the roof cannot exceed the parapet height and be visible. Confirmation is needed that they will not be visible beyond the parapet. If visible, it will result in the failure of HCOD inspections and could potentially halt construction until such time as corrective action is taken.

Lighting (See Attachment 7 for Lighting Plan)

Applying Sec. 4.24.3.C. (S.C. Highway 170/U.S. Highway 278 Corridor Overlay District, Lighting), findings include:

- 1) **Finding – Light Locations.** All exterior architectural lighting, display and decorative lighting visible from the Highway 170 corridor shall be generated from concealed light source, low level light fixtures. The only lighting fixtures identified are pole lights, which comply except for the light source (see #2 below). Lighting details for all other proposed lights must be provided.
- 2) **Finding – Light Source (Lamp).** Per Section 4.24.3.C.2.(a)(ii). of the BZDSO, only incandescent, fluorescent, metal halide, mercury vapor or color corrected high-pressure sodium light may be used. The same type must be used for the same or similar type of lighting on any site. The Applicant proposes the use of LED luminaries in the parking area. As such, the Planning Commission must

determine the appropriateness of the use of LED lighting as a substitute for those listed in this section.

Other Items

- 1) ***Finding – Signage.*** Signage is reviewed through a separate Sign Permit process for review and approval by the Town of Bluffton.
- 2) ***Finding – Development Name.*** The development name has been identified as both “Venture at Okatie Bluff” and “Venture and Okatie Bluffs.” Confirmation of the correct name is needed.

B. PUD MASTER PLAN

The Buckwalter Master Plan document refers to the Buckwalter PUD for design standards.

- 1) ***Finding – Buckwalter Master Plan.*** The application is in compliance with the Buckwalter Master Plan.

C. DECLARATION OF COVENANTS, CONDITIONS, AND RESTRICTIONS (CC&Rs)

The Declaration of Covenants, Conditions, and Restrictions for the New Riverside Village Master Plan.

- 1) ***Finding – Declaration of CC&Rs.*** A letter from the Declarant for Buckwalter PUD must be provided indicating that the application is in compliance with the Covenants, Conditions and Restrictions for Buckwalter PUD.

3. Section 3.17.3.C. The application must comply with applicable requirements in the Application Manual.

- a. ***Finding.*** The application has been reviewed by Town Staff and has been determined to be complete and it meets all requirements of the Applications Manual.

RECOMMENDATION: Should the Planning Commission choose to approve the application with conditions, Town staff finds that the following conditions should be met to be in accordance with the requirements of Section 3.10.3.A:

1. Architecture

- a. For the ground floor of each apartment building, extend brick cladding to the second floor.
- b. **Planning Commission Determination Needed:** Determine whether the long rear elevations of each apartment building are sufficiently articulated to comply with Sec. 4.24.3.A.3.c.
- c. Confirmation that the rooftop mechanical equipment will not extend beyond the parapet and acknowledgment that should they be installed during construction and be

visible, it will result in the failure of HCOD inspections and potentially halt construction until corrected.

2. Lighting

- a. If additional future lighting is proposed, including exterior building lighting, details must be provided to show compliance with Sec. 4.24.3.C.
- b. **Planning Commission Determination Needed:** Per Sec. 4.24.3.C.2.(a)(ii), the Planning Commission must determine the appropriateness of the use of LED lighting as a substitute for those types listed within this section.

3. Other Items

- a. Confirm if development name is “Venture at Okatie Bluff” or “Venture at Okatie Bluffs.”
- b. Provide a letter from the Declarant for Buckwalter indicating that the application complies with the Covenants, Conditions and Restrictions for Buckwalter.
- c. Submit signage via the Sign Permit process.

PLANNING COMMISSION ACTIONS: As granted by the powers and duties set forth in Section 2.2.6.C.6. of the Unified Development Ordinance, the Planning Commission has the authority to take the following actions with respect to this application:

1. Approve the application as submitted by the Applicant;
2. Approve the application with conditions; or
3. Deny the application as submitted by the Applicant.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Vicinity Map
2. Application and Narrative
3. Partial Plan Set
4. DRC Comments (10.09.2024)
5. Architectural
6. Landscape Plan
7. Lighting Plan