

TOWN COUNCIL

STAFF REPORT Executive Department



MEETING DATE:	June 9, 2026
PROJECT:	Consideration of a Resolution to Establish an Entertainment Venue Exploratory Workgroup
PROJECT MANAGER:	Chris Forster, MPA, CPFO, CGFM, Assistant Town Manager

REQUEST:

Town Staff requests that Town Council consider the following:

1. Authorization to establish an Entertainment Venue Exploratory Workgroup charged with evaluating the feasibility, potential scope, citing considerations, funding mechanisms, and community impact of developing an entertainment venue to serve the Town of Bluffton and surrounding areas.
2. Approval of the Workgroup's proposed charge, membership composition, and timeline for delivering findings and recommendations to Town Council, as further described in the attachments to this report.

BACKGROUND:

Overview

The Town of Bluffton, South Carolina, has experienced sustained population growth and community development over the past two decades, resulting in an increasing demand for cultural amenities and public gathering spaces that reflect the Town's identity. The establishment of an Entertainment Venue Exploratory Workgroup represents a preliminary step in evaluating the feasibility, community need, and potential framework for a dedicated entertainment venue within the Town's jurisdiction.

Completed Work

The Town of Bluffton has long recognized the economic and cultural value of the arts. As early as November 2015, Town Council considered a resolution authorizing the designation of a State-Designated Cultural District by the South Carolina Arts Commission, reflecting a longstanding commitment to arts and cultural development in the community. Bluffton's cultural identity has historically supported its retail businesses and restaurants, and the Town has built its community character on inviting residents and visitors alike to engage with its cultural offerings.

In late 2024, at the request of some on Council, the Town formally initiated a feasibility study for a potential performing arts venue. Johnson Consulting was selected as the lowest responsive bidder. They were selected for their proven track record of work evaluating the feasibility of entertainment venues worldwide, their independence from construction and operations of such facilities and their record of proposing realistic assessments that don't always recommend proceeding with projects if the research does not justify it.

Johnson Consulting's engagement encompassed an eight-task scope of work, including project orientation and initial fieldwork, economic and demographic market analysis, performing arts and cultural trends analysis, review of performing arts and entertainment venues, stakeholder engagement, analysis of national comparable facilities, recommendations, and demand projections. The firm brought to the engagement a nationally recognized multi-task approach used on hundreds of feasibility projects across the country, as well as a substantial database of financial and operating data for performing arts centers throughout the U.S.

At the April 21, 2026 Town Council Quarterly Workshop, staff presented the performing arts venue research to date, including a broader discussion of the economic rationale for cultural investment and a summary of information gathered during site visits of similar facilities used in the benchmarking assessment. The workshop presented the connection between cultural investment and long-term economic prosperity.

Context and Purpose

The Entertainment Venue Exploratory Workgroup is proposed as an advisory body tasked with conducting a comprehensive assessment of the viability of establishing an entertainment venue to serve the residents of the Town of Bluffton and the broader Lowcountry region. The Workgroup's work is intended to provide Town Council with an informed basis upon which to determine whether to advance the concept to subsequent planning, design, and funding phases.

The exploratory effort is consistent with the Town strategic plan's commitment to enhancing quality of life, fostering cultural enrichment, and supporting economic vitality through placemaking and community investment. A performing arts center or similar entertainment venue has the potential to serve as both a cultural anchor and an economic driver, attracting visitors, supporting local artists and arts organizations, and providing a venue for educational programming, civic events, and community gatherings.

Workgroup Composition

The Exploratory Workgroup is expected to comprise members who collectively bring expertise and perspective relevant to the scope of the Workgroup's work. It is recommended to establish a Workgroup of at least seven members. It is recommended members serve one-year terms that can be renewed annually as long as the Council determines there is an ongoing need for the Workgroup. The Executive lead for the Workgroup will be Chris Forster, Assistant Town Manager, and the staff support for the Workgroup will be Paul Arvantides, Don Ryan CEO.

Timeline and Deliverables

The Exploratory Workgroup is anticipated to conduct its work over the next 12 – 18 months, with a recommendation that the Workgroup periodically present its findings to Town Council. Deliverables are expected to include a report or presentation summarizing the Workgroup's research, analysis, funding feasibility, community engagement findings, and recommendations regarding whether and how the Town should proceed with further planning for a performing arts center.

Alignment with Town Plans and Priorities

The exploration of an entertainment venue aligns with several themes and priorities articulated in the Town of Bluffton's adopted planning documents and strategic initiatives. The Town's Comprehensive Plan emphasizes the importance of cultural resources, placemaking, and community identity as integral components of sustainable growth. Investment in cultural infrastructure supports the Town's vision for a vibrant, livable community that retains its unique character while accommodating growth and diversifying its economic base.

Additionally, the exploration of an entertainment facility is consistent with the Town's commitment to providing high-quality public amenities and services that enhance resident satisfaction and community pride. The Workgroup's work will help ensure that any future decisions regarding a potential new venue are grounded in thorough research, community input, and sound fiscal analysis.

NEXT STEPS:

Upon Town Council action regarding the establishment of the Entertainment Venue Exploratory Workgroup, the following sequential steps will occur:

1. **Town Council authorizes** the formation of the Entertainment Venue Exploratory Workgroup by resolution.
2. **Workgroup members are appointed** in accordance with the Town of Bluffton's established procedures for advisory workgroup appointments.
3. **The Entertainment Venue Exploratory Workgroup convenes** and begins its work pursuant to the scope and timeline outlined in the authorizing resolution, including any required community engagement, site evaluation, financial feasibility analysis, and partnership exploration.
4. **The Workgroup reports on findings and recommendations to Town Council** at the conclusion of the exploratory period, or at such interim milestones as directed by Town Council, for further deliberation and potential action.
5. **Town Council considers the Workgroup's recommendations** and determines whether to advance subsequent phases, which may include formal site selection, funding strategies, design procurement, or other actions as warranted by the Workgroup's findings.

Should Town Council request modifications to the Workgroup's charge, composition, or timeline, staff will incorporate those revisions and return with an updated resolution for consideration at a future regularly scheduled Town Council meeting.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Workgroup Charge
2. Resolution
3. Proposed Motion

Exploratory Workgroup Charge

The Entertainment Venue Exploratory Workgroup is charged with evaluating feasibility, identifying pros and cons, exploring fundraising potential, assessing community demand, exploring potential scope and design, identifying funding approaches, and highlighting planning considerations of a new entertainment venue in the Town of Bluffton. They oversee project goals, ensure stakeholder alignment, review preliminary findings, and make final recommendations to Council on whether to proceed and under what conditions.

1. Purpose

- *Phase 1:* To investigate the feasibility, desirability, and financial viability of constructing and operating a new entertainment venue.
- *Phase 2* (if needed): To make recommendations on scope, the physical design, operational model, and strategic plan.
- *Phase 3* (if needed): Oversee planning and design.

2. Scope of Responsibilities

- **Needs Assessment:** Assess reports on future entertainment venue needs, including specialized spaces.
- **Community Engagement:** Ensure community input is gathered on the project and proposal.
- **Feasibility & Planning:** Review preliminary site studies, design proposals, and cost estimates for the PAC and any associated amenities.
- **Funding & Financing:** Explore public-private partnerships, fundraising models, grant opportunities, and make recommendations on public funding approaches.
- **Project Oversight:** Provide expert oversight and direction, ensuring the project remains aligned with strategic goals.

3. Key Deliverables

- A Workgroup assessment of current feasibility studies and applicable research identifying pros and cons of moving forward and a recommendation on how to proceed.
- A fundraising feasibility study identifying potential partners and an assessment of total potential private capital that could be raised.

- Survey results of community opinion on the need, scope and cost of an entertainment venue.
- Recommended operational structure to maintain and operate a new venue.
- Final report detailing project cost estimates, funding strategies, construction timeline and recommendation to proceed or not proceed with a project.

4. Membership

The Workgroup consists of up to seven members, approved by Bluffton Town Council. Members should consist of community members and/or business stakeholders and technical advisors. The Executive lead for the Workgroup will be Chris Forster, Assistant Town Manager. Staff support for the Workgroup will be led by Paul Arvantides, Don Ryan CEO.

5. Reporting Structure

- The Workgroup reports to the Town Council and submits updates at Councils request.
- The Workgroup may form subgroups, as needed to study specific issues and report to the Workgroup.

6. Timeline

September 8, 2026: Written report to Council - Assessment of feasibility studies and staff research.

October 27, 2026: Report on the findings of the fundraising feasibility study.

December 8, 2026: Presentation of community survey results.

January 2027: Comprehensive presentation of work to date and recommended next steps.

*The schedule includes proposed dates but are subject to change based on progress of the Workgroup and the consultants that may be secured.

RESOLUTION NO. 2026-__

**A RESOLUTION OF THE TOWN COUNCIL OF THE TOWN OF BLUFFTON, SOUTH CAROLINA,
ESTABLISHING THE TOWN OF BLUFFTON ENTERTAINMENT VENUE EXPLORATORY
WORKGROUP AND APPROVING THE WORKGROUP CHARGE**

WHEREAS, the Town of Bluffton, South Carolina (the "Town") is an incorporated municipality located in Beaufort County, and as such possesses all powers granted to municipalities by the Constitution and general laws of the State of South Carolina; and

WHEREAS, pursuant to Section 5-5-10, Code of Laws of South Carolina 1976, as amended, the Town has selected the council-manager form of government and is governed by a council composed of a Mayor and council members which constitute the governing body of the Town (the "Town Council"); and

WHEREAS, the Town Council desires to establish the Town of Bluffton Entertainment Venue Exploratory Workgroup (the "Workgroup") as a time-limited advisory Workgroup; and

WHEREAS, Town Council desires to define the Workgroup's charge, procedures, and responsibilities, which are provided below; and

WHEREAS, the establishment of this Workgroup is consistent with the Code of Ordinances for the Town of Bluffton, Chapter 3, Boards, Workgroups and Commissions Terms, Appointments and Qualifications.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE TOWN COUNCIL OF THE TOWN OF BLUFFTON AS FOLLOWS:

1. Town Council hereby establishes the Town of Bluffton Entertainment Venue Exploratory Workgroup (the "Workgroup").
2. The Workgroup is tasked with serving as an advisory body to Town Council by researching, evaluating, and reporting on the feasibility, regulatory considerations, economic impacts, and community implications of entertainment venues within the Town of Bluffton.
3. The Workgroup is charged with the following responsibilities:
 - a. A Workgroup assessment of current feasibility studies and applicable research identifying pros and cons of moving forward and a recommendation on how to proceed.
 - b. A fundraising feasibility study identifying potential partners and an assessment of total potential private capital that could be raised.
 - c. Survey results of community opinion on the need, scope and cost of an entertainment venue.
 - d. Recommended operational structure to maintain and operate a new venue.
 - e. Final report detailing project cost estimates, funding strategies, construction timeline and recommendation to proceed or not proceed with a project.

f. Perform such other related duties as may be assigned by Town Council.

4. Membership. The Workgroup shall consist of no more than seven (7) members appointed by Town Council. Workgroup members shall serve without compensation. No member of the Workgroup shall hold an elected position in the Town or other municipalities within Beaufort County.

5. Term. The Workgroup is established as a time-limited exploratory body. The Workgroup shall dissolve upon completion of the Workgroup charges and final presentation to Town Council if no additional charges are assigned to the Workgroup that extend their work, or upon a vote of Town Council to dissolve the Workgroup, whichever occurs first. Council may replace members of the Workgroup at their discretion.

8. Meetings. Meetings will be led by Town staff identified in the Workgroup charge. Staff will provide support to the Workgroup including but not limited to; conducting additional research, procuring consultants, and creating reports and presentations with direction from the Workgroup. The Workgroup shall meet as needed to fulfill its charge and shall adopt a meeting schedule at its first meeting. Meetings may be cancelled if there is no business before the Workgroup.

ADOPTED this ___ day of _____, 2026.

Larry Toomer, Mayor
Town of Bluffton, South Carolina

ATTEST:

Marcia Hunter, Town Clerk
Town of Bluffton, South Carolina

Recommended Motion

"I make a motion to approve a Resolution Establishing the Town of Bluffton Entertainment Venue Exploratory Workgroup and Approving the Workgroup Charge."