



Bertie County's Tall Glass of Water

By Ben Christman | NCACC Creative Communications Coordinator

The sound, both the one you can see and the one you can hear, is a thing of excitement and inspiration in the northeastern corner of North Carolina's shoreline.

If you're looking at the sound, it's a conspicuous inlet that juts about 50 miles inland from the Outer Banks and is labeled the Albemarle Sound on a map of our state.

But if you're hearing the sound – especially from Bertie County Commissioners – just above the ambient rolling waves, what you pick up is seemingly endless ideas and creative opportunities for better ways to better serve their citizens.

"This is property that only God could have made," says Chairman John Trent, who has served as a commissioner since 2012. "Where can you see this other than Bertie County? This is just a

remarkable view. With the sun coming up across the bridge, the cypress trees, Salmon Creek back this way, Scotch Hall over here."

"Wait till you get down to the water, it's gorgeous – that's the best selling point," adds Commissioner Ron Wesson. In agreement, Commissioner Tammy Lee states: "it's more than a beach."

In this idyllic setting, it's easy to talk about how this space could be a showcase for the county. "We always knew that we wanted to develop a reason to come to Bertie County," said Wesson. "Anything you can add that brings people to your county – new people that haven't seen it before – is always a plus. But we also knew that the people who were in the county needed something that they could really be proud of."

The need for a point of pride in Bertie is not an idea Commissioner Wesson takes lightly. He's a native of the county and was also elected to the Board of Commissioners in 2012. When he talks about growing up in the area, he recalls the lack of opportunities he had for enjoying something as foundational to childhood as taking a swim during the summertime.

"As a youngster I always wanted to learn how to swim, and there were not places here in this county that I could go and swim. I remember when I was about 9 years old, my mother took me over to a neighboring county because she heard that we could go there and swim – but unfortunately we were turned away," he notes, with resilience. "She got us back in the car and took us 42 miles to Rocky Mount, and she did that every week during the summer until we learned how to swim. That meant a lot to her, but it meant even more to me."

The desire to use this sound property

to make their county an even better place to live resonates among the board. Commissioner Lee, who was elected in 2014 and has lived in Bertie County for 35 years, shares her first impression of the land and the vision for it.

"I originally saw the 'for sale' sign for this property, but I thought - and we thought - it was road frontage, and we were thinking Wal-Mart Supercenter or something along those lines," she admits. "And so I called our Economic Developer Steve Biggs, and the next thing I know I'm hearing about waterfront property, which is a lot more exciting!"

However, in Lee's mind, that didn't necessarily mean it was a done deal. "As a new commissioner, the thought of spending that kind of money threw me for a loop. I prayed over it a lot and thought about it, but the opportunities for our citizens to have this beachfront, and what we envision it can become, is wonderful."

In agreement, Commissioner Wesson



NCACC Government Relations Coordinator Amber Harris speaks with Bertie County Commissioners about a project to create the county's first public beach. From left, John Trent, Chairman, and Commissioners Ron Wesson and Tammy Lee.



The "Tall Glass of Water" story is from an episode of *CountyCast*, the NCACC's podcast designed to educate listeners about the level of government closest to the people – counties. The show will return with new episodes for season two in early 2020, so in the meantime be sure to catch up on past episodes, including these highlights:

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adds that "Tammy hit it right on the nose. In a county where there are so many needs, and resources are so critical, when you talk about doing a project like this you've got to be able to convince people that it is an extremely good use of very limited resources. You've got to get them to see the vision that this is an investment that will grow and the return for us over the years and in the future will be significant." In an inspired tone, he adds: "but that's our job – to lay that vision, to explain why this is critical to us, and that it is economic development. It's not bricks and mortar, it's not smokestacks, but trust me, it can bring resources and job opportunities and visibility to this county, and that's what we need."

So how did the Tall Glass of Water project, as it's locally known – a codename taken from actor Cary Grant's nickname, according to Commissioner Trent – go from "for sale sign" to featured county highlight? How did it go from a vision to a reality?

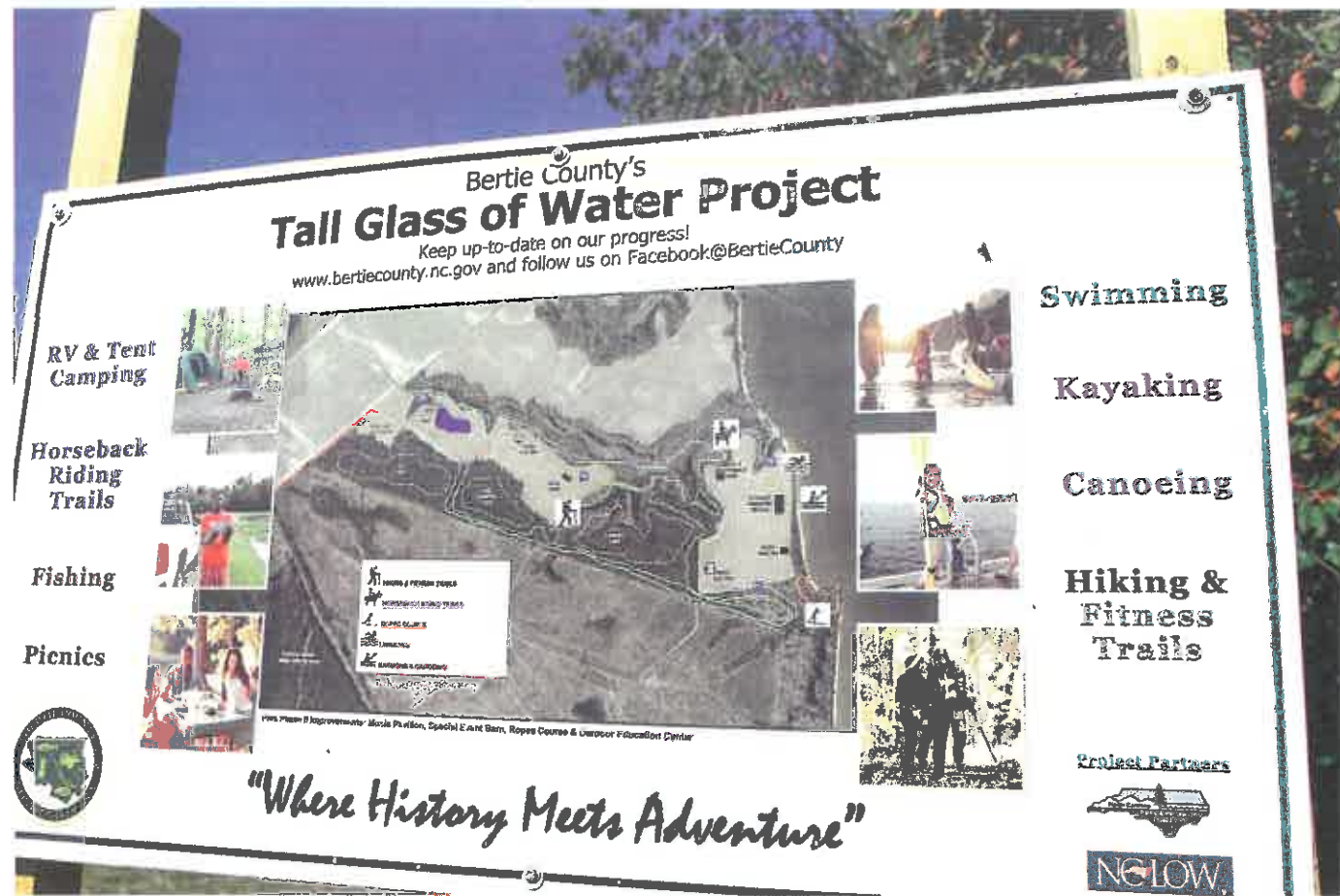
For Commissioner Lee, the answer, the very solution to all of the technical details that had to be worked out, is Scott Sauer, who began working as Bertie

County Manager in 2013 and happened to be in his last week before retirement at the time of this interview. "He has worked hours after hours on this project, and he deserves a lot of credit. We will miss him. His passion that he showed towards this project – he's just been extremely instrumental in us getting as far as we've gotten."

As the other commissioners nod in agreement, it is noted: "can you believe that we acquired this property in the same year that we actually cut taxes in Bertie County? We acquired this property for a little less than \$1 million in the same year that we cut taxes for our citizens," explains Wesson. "This property happened to be in a water district where we had a significant fund balance that was owed back to the county. So these funds were available to us, and we used those funds in that very same district."

Commissioner Trent spoke about the county applying for grant funds and how they were heartened to receive a \$500,000 grant, thereby reducing the purchase price by half.

Securing initial funding and getting the community to believe in the vision



was just the first step, however. To develop the project further, “The next challenge will be to identify funding to develop the property like we envisioned,” said Trent, “like having a mobile stage that pops up with lights and other features, providing a venue for concerts and other events.”

Before the plans accelerate in their development, it’s evident these stewards of the county want to continue to approach this task with thoughtful decision-making and follow-through. “You don’t want to move too quickly, because you want to weigh all of your options and know exactly what we want and how we’re going to pay for it,” says Commissioner Lee. “If you move too quickly, then you may take a road somewhere that, later on, you discover, ‘oh it’s right in the middle of the camping area we wanted to have.’”

While the scope of the Tall Glass of

Water project remains fluid, there seems to be a distinct theme on all of these commissioners’ minds.

“We want our students in elementary school and middle school to be able to take field trips to places right here in their county,” says Trent. “I see this as a great educational piece for our school system to use.” In the same vein, Wesson states: “there should be a learning element to this – let’s learn about the shoreline and the ecology in this part of the state. We do have world-class waterways, so where do you go to learn about that?”

And this property presents an abundance of opportunities to learn – not only from an ecological standpoint but from a historical one as well. Wesson discussed the archaeological importance of the area, noting a study, which suggests that Bertie County is where The Lost Colony settled. Located near the beach



is Salmon Creek State Natural Area, which is managed by the NC Division of Parks and Recreation. It is the subject of archaeological research by the First Colony Foundation. According to a recent press release from N.C. Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, “Native Algonkin and English artifacts indicative of settlement by the Roanoke colonists have been found on the site. Some researchers theorize the artifacts could provide evidence that survivors from The Lost Colony relocated to the area in the late 1580s.”

As a sort of test run and display as to what the park could offer on the sound property, the county held a “Bertie Beach Day” in June of this year. According to the commissioners, the turnout was encouraging and emphasized the value of this piece of land, especially for children in the area.

“There were over 1000 people there, easily. People came from surrounding areas, and we had some people in from the southern part of Virginia who came to be a part of the grand opening,” recalls Trent. “We spoke with attendees about the fact that this is not only a Bertie County beach for Bertie County citizens, it’s also for anyone who wants to visit Bertie County and come enjoy this. It was just a very touching, feel-good moment is the best way to word it.”

From Commissioner Lee’s perspective, “the opening day was a huge success and it allowed our citizens to come out and see the property and participate. The whole day was just absolutely wonderful.

Seeing the children down there that day swimming and playing together was touching.” Reflecting on the grand opening, Commissioner Wesson recalls that “a lot of us were in the water, with the kids and all – but one little kid, he must have been 8 years old or so, he said ‘Commissioner Wesson, thank you so much for letting us come down here and use your beach!’ And I said, ‘no son, this is not my beach, this beach actually belongs to you ... now your job, is to make sure you take care of it.’ And he looked at me and was so happy, but he didn’t have that sense that we work for the citizens, and this is something that belongs to him.”

With so much potential, and a lot of careful planning, this sound has the potential of transforming Bertie County. In calculating the land’s worth, Commissioner Trent says that they “recognize the value in that land, not monetarily, but emotionally – it’s a pick-me-up for the people of Bertie County to let them know that we are working for them and to let them know that we’re investing resources into something that can grow, and it will grow this county.”

The “Tall Glass of Water” property can be reached from the town of Windsor by taking Highway 17 North towards Edenton. Approximately 1 mile before Chowan River Bridge, turn right onto Bal Gra Road, and follow the signs for parking. The park is open from dawn to dusk. To find out more, visit the county’s website at www.co.bertie.nc.us and search “TGOW.” ■