



HILTON HEAD ISLAND

R/UDAT

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TOWN OF HILTON HEAD ISLAND
SOUTH CAROLINA

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REGIONAL/URBAN DESIGN ASSISTANCE TEAM • THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

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What is R/UDAT?

The R/UDAT Concept

The Regional and Urban Design Committee of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) has been sending Urban Design Assistance Teams to various American cities since 1967.

The teams respond to the problems as described by the local AIA Chapters and their community sponsors.

Each Regional/Urban Design Assistance (R/UDAT) is specially selected to include professionals experienced in the particular problems of the area under study. Team members are not compensated for their services and agree not to accept commissions for work resulting from their recommendations.

The team acquaints itself with the community and its people, engages in analysis from a fresh and unbiased perspective, and offers its recommendations for planning and action strategies.

The process is very intense and includes team meetings with community groups, residents, site visits and tours, public hearings and late night work sessions. This report is the end product of the four day effort.

Over two hundred cities with a combined population of more than 25 million citizens have been served and professional services valued in excess of \$4 million have been donated. Hilton Head Island is R/UDAT number 213.

Making R/UDAT Happen

The R/UDAT program receives many inquiries each year from communities throughout the country requesting assistance. Communities that are selected for R/UDAT visits must demonstrate to the National Task Group community-wide support. This support must come from both the public and private sectors and represent broad support throughout all of the segments of the community. This support must be documented to the R/UDAT Task Group through letters, cash contributions, and in-kind services and contributions.

The citizens of Hilton Head Island, acting through their local R/UDAT Steering Committee, have clearly demonstrated their commitment to R/UDAT.



HILTON HEAD ISLAND R/UDAT

Mission Statement

To provide an objective, politics-free process for the Island's northwest quadrant with the goal of bringing that area's development into the Island's economic mainstream; to open up lines of communication among Ward 1's neighborhoods and with the Island community at large; to build trust in an Island wide relationship historically marked by distrust and misunderstanding; and to provide the people of Ward 1 the tools they need to more effectively advance their economic interests.

Objectives

Outline and initiate a process that would eventually culminate in conceptual land use plans to be used by the four neighborhood groupings in Ward 1. The process should result in neighborhoods consensus on a plan and result in market-based development of areas of the community, not just individually owned parcels. The process must take into account the fractionalized nature of land ownership in the area and recommend funding mechanisms and sources to bring a plan closer to fruition.

Outline a process that would result in a conceptual utilities plan (roads, water, sewer, drainage, electricity and cable television) to be used by the four neighborhood groupings in Ward 1. The process should include funding mechanisms and sources to bring a plan closer to fruition.

Identify mechanisms and funding sources for the legal costs of clearing title to heirs property.

Identify methods to provide property tax relief where appropriate and desired to ensure continued ownership even as the land's market value increased with economic development.

A Development History of Hilton Head Island

In the span of a few decades, Hilton Head Island transformed from a small rural, agricultural community to a regional urban center and international resort.

But that development has been the tale of two communities. On the 20,000 acres concentrated in large tract ownership in the 1950's, development came relatively swiftly, guided and funded by private interests who employed private controls over future land use to protect, enhance and profit from the Island's natural beauty.

In contrast, the 3,500 acres of Ward 1, held largely in 5- to 10-acre parcels, remains much as it was in 1956 when the first bridge to Hilton Head opened up development to this sea island. The hurdles to reaping the economic rewards enjoyed by land owners in other parts of the Island have to date proved too high for many. They include fragmented land ownership, multiple ownership with clouded legal title ("heirs" property), lack of financial resources, lack of utility services, and an increasing tax burden as development elsewhere boosted land values. Many Ward 1 families have owned and lived on this land since their forebears bought it shortly after the Civil War. Their ties to the land are deep, and it is an inheritance they have protected fiercely to pass on to their children.

Each of the planned communities on Hilton Head (Sea Pines, Palmetto Dunes, Port Royal, for example) began with a conceptual master plan. Such privately funded master plans were the starting points of a 20- to 30-year process of

community building. Such plans typically involved an array of skilled professionals, including landscape architects and land-use planners, architects, market research analysts, land-use lawyers, financial analysts, engineers, golf course architects, naturalists and ecologists and others. Both initial plan development and subsequent plan revisions were costly and time-consuming.

While most planned community development on Hilton Head Island occurred under tight private controls, the period from the mid-1970's to the early 1980's saw the emergence of development marked by higher density and few land-use controls. This type of development sparked the effort to incorporate the Town of Hilton Head Island when critics did not get the response they sought from Beaufort County officials.

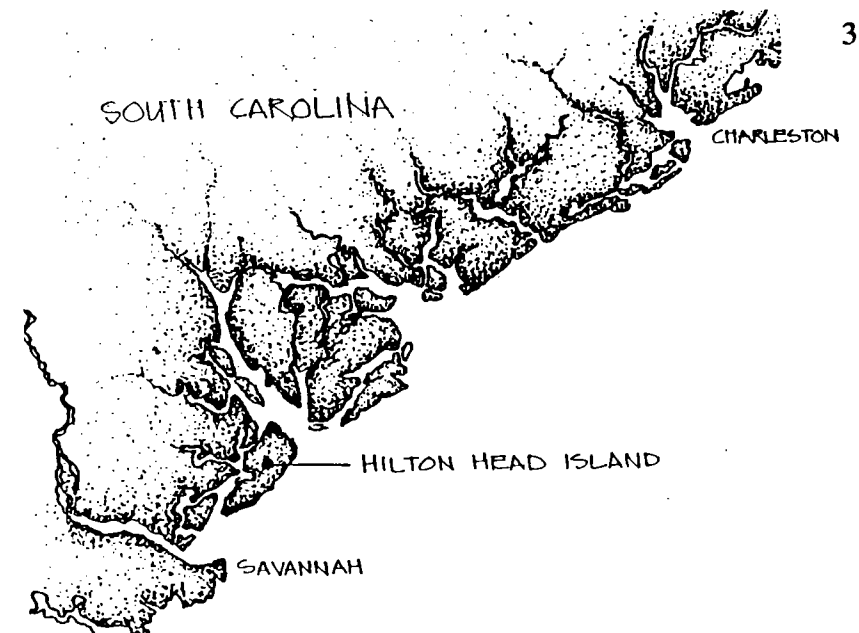
In 1983, Island voters approved a "limited services" government that concentrated initially on the regulation of development and growth. The local branch of the NAACP and many Ward 1 residents fought incorporation because they saw few benefits for their community from a "limited services" government, only higher taxes.

The resulting political climate is one marked by distrust. Many native islanders have seen wholesale change brought to their community's way of life with relatively little perceived economic benefit, particularly as landholders. Some seek ways to hold onto their land as is, but face mounting financial pressures to do otherwise. Others are ready to reap the economic benefits of development, but lack the resources.

The fragmented land ownership and heirs property issues have made even the seemingly simple task of paving a road nearly impossible and has added to the complexity and expense of providing water and sewer service to Ward 1 residents and landowners.

What the Hilton Head Island community now seeks is the end to this separation by degrees of development. The Island can no longer bear the fragmentation brought by economic disparity if it ever hopes to move forward as one community.

**Special thanks to Charles E. Fraser for his contributions to this narrative.*



Introduction

*We're free on Carolina's shore
We're all at home and free.*

John Greenleaf Whittier

The theme of this report is simple. This R/UDAT is not a study of design or planning, but of a chronic failure of a town to meet its municipal obligations. The town is focusing the costs of remedying the problems of growth on this Island on a small, closed class of its residents---the residents and owners of property in Ward 1. This policy appears to be conscious and permanent, no matter how much it is couched in words of deferral. It appears to be focused on the native Island residents, who have concluded, with some justification, that "we seem to be the real non-conforming use here."

This report sets forth a series of steps we believe that the town can take, if taken promptly, to retreat from this inequity. These are steps that we believe are basic duties of municipal government, and therefore they are not projects for the future, but mandates for the present. We believe that if the town does not implement these steps, it will be in further substantial default of its legal obligations.

It may very well be true that the Island is choked by traffic and growth and that every citizen faces the effects of congestion and perhaps even a sense of paradise lost. It may well be that the plantations were in the aggregate a significant over-development of the Island, because of the traffic and other demands they impose on the Island's resources. What is equally true is that the remedy for this problem is not to impose substantially all the cost of fixing it on the residents of Ward 1.

That, unfortunately, is what at present is being done. It is being done by refusing to see that Ward 1 residents get the same basic services that the residents of the rest of the town have enjoyed for years. It is being done by effectively closing down Ward 1 from development, certainly from the same level and acceptance of development that greeted the master plans for the plantations.

When the town officials say "we are not in the water, sewer, or road business," they miss, in our opinion, the most fundamental of their duties---the duty to provide equal and effective services to their residents. If there is another district or entity around that might take the lead in providing these services, all well and good, but the underlying obligation to pick up the flag if it is dropped by someone else is the duty of the town and the duty of no one else.

5 When the town officials say that we have traffic or other problems that temporarily prevent us from approving development of any size in Ward 1, they are not being entirely candid. It is apparent both in what has been said and done in the past 13 years that the town presently does not intend to permit Ward 1 to develop and that today's "deferral" of development is a prelude to some new policy of tomorrow that will say again that Ward 1 cannot get there from here. It is a simple fact that Ward 1 is not being permitted to develop; the town should face that fact squarely and for its own sake.

There is, finally, an irony in how this is all playing out, an irony that cannot go unnoticed or unmentioned. The native Island people were here first; some of their families go back many generations on this Island. They did not bring development here; left to themselves, they probably would have gone on into the distant future living the quiet, introspective, unchanging lives that most of them value above all else. They are not responsible for the ills of this Island;

their way of life is just as impacted by the congestion and the change as the environment is. They unwittingly mortgaged their way of life to the changes on this Island. And if being somewhere first counts for anything, it must bestow on these Island people a special equity in the well-being and bounty of this place.

To visit on them, therefore, the major burden of fixing the mistakes of growth here is wrong. It is a function not of a balance between right and wrong, but of political power and the neglect of simple justice. We have been profoundly moved, all of us, at how what has happened here to the native Island residents in the last 15 or 20 years cannot be made to seem symmetrical or fair no matter what vantage point is adopted to observe it.

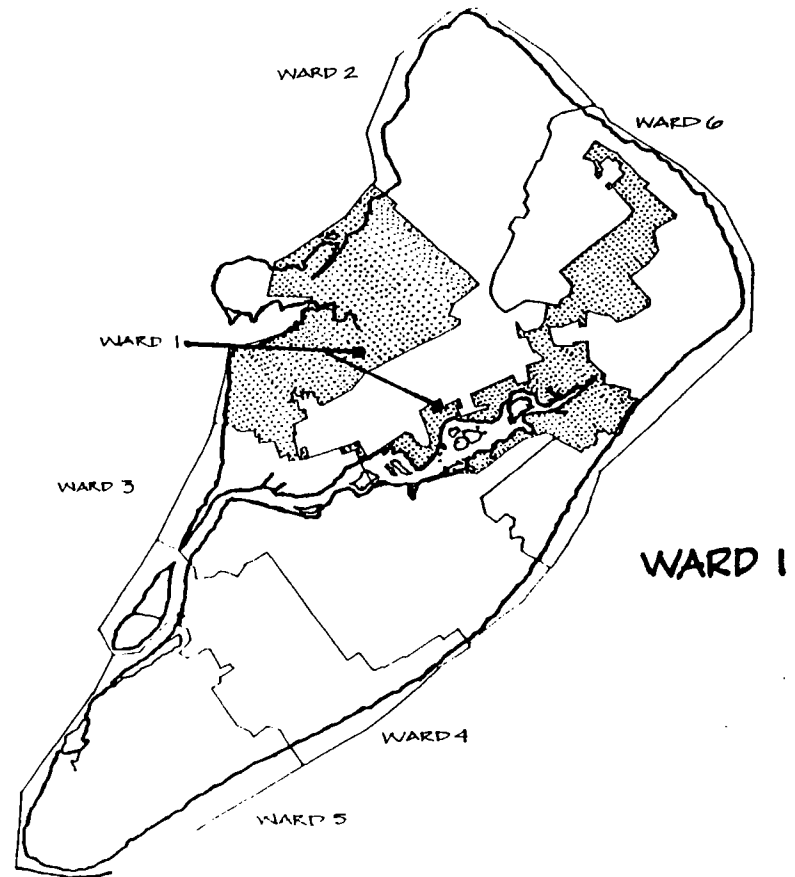
We have suggested that the town adopt a brief, focused, and specific period for master planning for Ward 1, perhaps no more than six months. The deferrals and delays of the last 15 years suggest that any longer period would be another invitation to delay for its own sake. During this period, we believe the town should examine and deal forthrightly with the specific issues that this R/UDAT has developed and set forth in this report. This is not because R/UDAT is able to see what no one else can see, but because R/UDAT has simply articulated in a categorical way what is as plain as the hand in front of your face. These issues are **obvious**.

Within the Ward 1 community there are differences of opinion, some disputes, and some would claim a certain "lack of vision." It is not possible to be too critical of anyone who seems to lack vision, when that person is preoccupied with getting basic services and a right to the use of his or her land. On the other hand, if the town enters into this brief period of planning with an open heart, the citizens of Ward 1 must be

prepared immediately to collaborate to make this period meaningful and productive.

One way in which the citizens of Ward 1 can collaborate is by fixing the problem of the heirs' property. We have suggested the creation of a non-profit corporation to bring within the means of every citizen the clearing of heirs title. We talk more of this plan in this report.

We have enjoyed it here, although this has been a non-traditional R/UDAT. The essence of R/UDAT is design, planning, and the implementation of ideas a whole community can get behind---ideas that the political structure supports, or at least takes seriously. This, at the moment, does not seem to be the definition of the problem here, but we have felt obligated for that fact alone to adopt a different and very direct approach to this problem.



Principles

During the course of the R/UDAT, many issues were raised by those who spoke to the team, at the Saturday morning hearing, in the small group meetings, and one on one in formal and informal encounters. While many people raised specific issues, whether they be the effects of the Traffic Impact Fee or the extension of sewer and water service into Ward 1, others raised fundamental questions about the nature of the community and its history, the role of local government, and the relationship of one part of the community to another. From a wide range of opinions, insights and viewpoints, five basic issues emerged:

- Vision
- Equity
- Responsibility
- History
- Urgency

These issues inevitably define the basic framework within which all other matters, from the most general to the most specific, must be perceived and addressed.

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Vision

Every community has a vision of what it is, and what it wants to become. Hilton Head Island, however, shares two conflicting visions for the same space. Until those visions are resolved into one, the Island can never become a true community.

The plantations were developed as resort communities, selling a idyllic vision unmarred by the realities of the communities from which the vacationers - and later the retirees - came. In this vision, the Native Islanders have become all but invisible. While it would be an exaggeration to suggest that this vision entails the

disappearance of the Native Islanders from Hilton Head Island, it has gone a long way in that respect. The traditional communities are unmarked on Island maps, and the rich history of the Island from the Civil War to the establishment of Sea Pines Plantation gets short shrift in tourist brochures and guidebooks.

This community has no true vision of the future, or if it does, it is of a future that is essentially the present refined and marginally improved. It is no surprise that the Town's comprehensive plan, although detailed and informative, makes no attempt to convey a vision of the future. The creative spirit that characterized the initial development of the plantations appears to have been lost.

Side by side with the plantations live the Native Islanders, a people with a radically different vision of the Island, which is home to them in a more intense and permanent way, an Island to which - despite the pressures of recent decades - they remain committed. Their vision is of a community seeking to survive in and on their land, fighting to do so against almost insurmountable social and economic pressure.

While it appears that much of the Town's majority looks forward to a future much like the present, the same is not true of the Native Islanders. Their future as a community is likely to be either worse - perhaps far worse - or better.

While many Ward 1 residents and property owners with whom we spoke talked of a vision of a place in which they could live comfortably, supported by a strong community, with good public services and economic opportunities, they all realized that this would only come into being through concerted action, not only by themselves, but by the entire Island. The R/UDAT team feels that this is a vision worth working, and if necessary fighting, for.

The goal of making that vision a reality forms the fundamental grounding for our recommendations.

Equity

Equity is a fundamental principle of American society. It means that different individuals and groups are treated fairly, that resources are fairly divided and shared, and that opportunities are equally available to all. Hilton Head Island falls seriously short of living up to this principle.

Within the Island live two groups, one made up of people whose families have been long-time residents, and another of - more or less - recent migrants. The latter group, largely residents of the plantations, are substantially more affluent as a group than the former, the Native Islanders. By living in the plantations, where services are provided by private associations, the latter enjoy a far higher level of service than the former, who are dependent for public services on a government with a narrow view of its responsibilities to its citizens. While there may be historical reasons for this disparity, and some may try to justify it on economic grounds, the fact remains that it is not equitable. It is not a fair distribution of resources.

That same government, mandated by the majority of its citizens to control growth on the remaining vacant land on the Island, imposes constraints with a heavy hand on the owners of the remaining vacant land, predominately the Native Islanders. By comparison, the owners of the plantations - more than 2/3 of the Island - largely wealthy recent arrivals, obtained vested development rights prior to incorporation of the Town, and are thus immune from the Town's restrictive land management policies. One can argue that this inequity is a function of time, rather than conscious design, but its existence cannot be denied.

