

For a lot of people, the Lowcountry is paradise. The problem is, we can't seem to agree on exactly what this paradise consists of.



For Beaufort County, the general consensus is that city stuff, like fast food restaurants and four-story buildings, shouldn't be out in the country where it ruins the view of the tomato fields. And the rural-looking stuff, like barns and packing houses, shouldn't be next to city hall.

Those are no-brainers, though. It's all of the in-between stuff that's tough to grapple with. And where do you even begin to start?

Well, I hear a lot of this: "You have to start with a vision!"

Newsflash. We have one. Had it since 1997. Here's how it goes:

The Vision for Beaufort County

Beaufort County must preserve, protect and enhance the...quality of its waterways, natural environment, historic resources, fisheries, rural areas, agricultural land (where possible), existing communities, population diversity (age and race), and unique scale and character... that foster a sense of community, make the County a desirable place to live, work and call home, and a valuable tourist destination. The County must also develop efficient public transportation and roadway systems to protect its attractiveness in the future.

The County must expand and diversify its economy to: Provide a broad employment base of "higher than minimum wage" jobs; and provide those jobs in close proximity to housing that is affordable for its residents.

This economic expansion and diversification should be viewed in the context of a regional economy. It should not occur at the expense of the natural and cultural environment which define the quality of life in the County.

The County must also expand its recreational opportunities both for local residents of all ages, and as an attraction for continued tourism and second home development.

The County must find a balance between both the private property rights and the rights of the neighbors and the community while preserving and enhancing the natural and cultural environment and quality of life of the community. In order to achieve this goal, the County must work toward increasing accessibility to the planning process for all citizens of the County and must work to carry out and respect the wishes of the people for the mutual benefit of all.

This was, of course, written by a committee of thousands. And it shows.

It's not terribly memorable. For that matter, it's not terribly grammatical, either.

And "preserving agricultural land (where possible)?" Talk about wiggle room!

Just for purposes of comparison, let's take a look at the vision statement in Louisiana Speaks. This document, produced by the Louisiana Recovery Authority, was released in May 2007. It is the product of dozens of meetings with thousands of Louisiana residents who were concerned with rebuilding their communities in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Louisiana Recovery Authority
Vision Goals

Recover sustainably, grow smarter and think regionally.

That's it. The title has almost as many words as the actual vision statement. It helps to have something short and sweet and easy to remember.

There are plenty of actual details, of course, with clearcut strategies linked to each section of the vision, and even a chart that shows who, among the various governmental entities, is supposed to do what, and by when. In July they'll unveil an expanded plan, one in which "each strategy is reinforced by a suite of concrete implementation actions."

If their new levees are constructed as well as their prose, they'll be in good shape. Here on the home front, we are working on a re-write of the Beaufort County Comprehensive Plan. It's due on Dec. 31, 2007.

We have a head start, in that we have the Southern Beaufort Plan finished, and the Northern Beaufort Plan almost done. Now, in the next few months, we just have to mesh the two together. Easier said than done, I know, but at least the process has begun.

Some people aren't happy with the public involvement aspect of the new comp plan. It's true that this time around, the way public input happens is different than the way it was in 1997. Back then comprehensive planning was new to us, and we had a lot of learning to do, and a lot of bones to pick with each other.

But remember, when the fray ended, instead of the scientifically sound, soil-type based plan that was first proposed, we got a cookie-cutter definition of rural that, with a few craftily negotiated development agreements, was too easy to transform into suburbia.

The new comp plan will probably build on the vision of 1997, but add an important overarching theme: sustainability. We've had the opportunity to learn more about this in the "Building on What We Treasure The Most" meetings sponsored by Beaufort County Planning, as well as the "Intelligent Design for Sustainable Living" seminars at USCB.

So we've learned about some of the finest thinking about planning that there is out there. And these new ways of thinking have surprising subtle ways of dealing with all of those in-between parts of our county – the things that aren't exactly rural, but aren't urban, either – in a graceful way.

The language is different, too. Instead of talking about specific land uses, there is more focus on doing what "looks right" and "feels right" in the areas that lie between city and country, so that mixed uses can be allowed. And best of all, there is an emphasis on providing choices for people.

So whether you want city excitement, or country solitude, or the sameness of suburbia, with intelligent design, we can all keep our Garden of Eden.