

Out with the old, in with the new?

Not around here. A lot of people don't want Beaufort County to change and they get bent out of shape when the scenery shifts.



I'm selectively resentful about change. I welcome things like the coffee shops, the Arts Council, the 911 system and Friends of Caroline Hospice.

There are other changes that don't float my boat. Here's a short list of projects that have rubbed me the wrong way:

Four-laning Ribaut Road. It was much prettier, and infinitely calmer, when it was just two lanes. Pros: Ambulances can get to the hospital a lot faster now. Cons: Everybody else goes way too fast. Now it feels like a NASCAR speedway going through the middle of my neighborhood.

The building of the New Bridge, AKA the McTeer Bridge. Pros: The new bridge made it more convenient to live on Lady's Island, so there was a sweet real estate boom as bedroom communities sprang up and people made tons of money. Cons: The new bridge made it more convenient to live on Lady's Island, so a bunch of bedroom communities sprang up and all of a sudden there were tons of cars.

Construction of Beaufort Plaza. That place ruined a perfectly good collard field. Pros: We got a new movie theater, a shiny laundromat, an air-conditioned ice cream parlor, and best of all a Grant's mass merchandise store. Cons: With all the new landmarks, it just made it that much easier to find the road to Savannah.

Residential development on barrier islands. Some places are great to visit, but you really, really, really don't want to live there. Especially during hurricane season. Pros: Great beachfront homes. Cons: Great beachfront homes that could disappear in August.

The advent of Dairy Queen. This is personal. My family had a little restaurant on Lady's Island that specialized in fast food and soft serve ice cream and other delicacies designed to plump up the populace – but after Dairy Queen came on the scene, the invisible hand of the market whipped our bee-hind. Pros: Freedom. Who wants to spend their life make crab burgers, anyway? Cons: Lost privilege of eating free crab burgers.

That's enough of that. Everybody around here has their own little list of complaints about why Beaufort County is no longer as great as it was when they were a) born here, b) first moved here, or c) last visited here.

Dr. Larry Rowland, the retired history professor who is the pride and joy of the University of South Carolina Beaufort, opened my eyes about all of this when I was in his class one day. He explained that the history of Beaufort has been a history of economic and social change.

When the Europeans came, they ditched the Indians and started trading in timber and pine tar. Then they ditched the forests and brought in Africans who planted indigo and rice. Then they ditched the indigo and started in with the Sea Island cotton. Then the federal government decided we needed to ditch slavery, so we started back with the timber and took on phosphate and fishing and farming.

All of these economic uses took their toll on the land, and for the most part, it recovered.

And all of that happened over centuries, so people, and this place, had time to adjust.

In our new, fast-growing go-go economy, though, the changes are coming at us so fast it's hard to catch our breath. And as for the land and the marshes and waters, they are probably feeling just about as stressed out as the rest of us.

There are times when I want it to all stop. I fear that one more big change is going to bring about the end of our hallowed Lowcountry lifestyle.

Then I remember Dr. Rowland's tale about the intracoastal waterway. It turns out that back in the 1920s or whenever, when the federal government was wanting to reroute some of the waterway and make it go through Beaufort, people pitched a fit.

All of that boat traffic would bring in undesirable elements. It would look terrible. It would feel weird. Beaufort would never be the same again. And the project was carried out despite the community's collective disgust at the prospect of having marinas and strange sailboats in our midst.

Now, in 2007, it's a different story. The way people see it now, the intracoastal is an asset, not an affront, to our lifestyle.

Oh, how times change.

And then again, they don't.