

Give islands needed protections

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Virtually every legislator in the Charleston and Beaufort delegations has endorsed a letter in support of protective regulations limiting the construction of bridges to marsh islands. The House Agriculture, Natural Resources and Environmental Affairs Committee should pay heed.

The letter, prepared and circulated by Rep. Ben Hagood, R- Sullivan's Island, cites the threat to marsh island by development, if restrictions are not placed on the permitting of bridges by which they can be accessed.

"We believe the proposed regulations represent a fair compromise between development, conservation and private property interests," the letter states. Twenty-six coastal legislators signed the letter.

Their endorsement reflects public sentiment along the coast, which is seeing the landscape rapidly altered by residential and resort development. A letter to the editor on this page, from Edisto Island resident Tom Mack, cites reasons why protections are necessary and calls on coastal legislators to make their voices heard. Thankfully, that's now being done.

Regulations governing state permits for bridges to marsh islands are needed to replace rules that were struck down by the state Supreme Court in 2005 because of the absence of precise language defining their size.

There are some 2,400 pristine marsh islands that are threatened with development in the absence of new rules. Proposed regulations would allow bridges to about 10 percent of that number.

The regulations were developed by a long process of give and take among the various groups interested in their future, including developers and conservationists. They have been endorsed by the state board of the Department of Health and Environmental Control, and were strongly supported by most who spoke at a recent legislative hearing before a subcommittee of the House Agriculture Committee.

At that hearing, a few critics questioned

DHEC's regulatory authority to enforce the permitting requirements. A subsequent opinion by Attorney General Henry McMaster concluded that the agency has the authority under the state's Coastal Zone Management Act.

Nevertheless, the House subcommittee endorsed a badly compromised version of the rules. The decision by the House Agriculture Committee, expected Tuesday, is viewed as critical to the enactment of meaningful restrictions.

About 80 percent of the marsh islands in South Carolina are located in Beaufort and Charleston counties. Legislators representing those counties clearly recognize the importance of limiting development of the small islands surrounded by marsh, creeks and rivers, all of which are valuable public resources. So should the members of the House Agriculture Committee.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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