

## **AN OPEN LETTER TO THE BEAUFORT COUNTY COUNCIL FROM CONCERNED DAUFUSKIE ISLANDERS**

Councilman Mark Lawson has provided several of our residents with answers to some of the questions raised at a January 21st meeting relating to Daufuskie Island's new public ferry service, and his email has been shared with the entire community. We assume you have received a similar correspondence from Mr. Lawson or Mr. Robinson.

Our community's collective belief is there is little new in these "answers" and that they barely scratch the surface of what we view as a fundamentally-flawed service generated by a fundamentally-flawed process. Further, we strongly disagree with some of the information provided in Mr. Lawson's communication.

This letter will summarize our concerns about the ferry situation, and include comments relating to the County's "answers" included in Mr. Lawson's communication. Please note that almost 200 islanders representing all Daufuskie communities have asked to be included on the signatories list at the end of the letter.

### **I. Procurement Process**

The County has made a mockery of the RFP process.

1) The very people whose lives and livelihood depend on this ferry service were completely excluded from the process. To this day, the County's lack of communication with our community is shocking to us. Councilman Lawson came over here to talk to residents only AFTER the procurement process was completed, and AFTER the contract was signed with Lowcountry Ferry, and his hurtful and baseless public comment (twice) that Daufuskie residents were "spoiled" by the previous service has caused many to lament the lack of an advocate for our community on the County Council.

Mr. Lawson's February 1st email announcing that "Lowcountry Ferry has our full support" and stating that the county and the operator will work together to address ferry issues shows yet again that the missing party in these discussions are his own constituents whose lives are so heavily impacted by the ferry service.

The Interim Administrator has stated that it's unusual to seek input during the procurement process, and that makes sense when we're talking about a landscaping contract. But the County has certainly held public discussions on other contracts that impact people's lives, such as the U.S. 278 corridor and bridge project. The ferry serves as OUR bridge, and we should have been involved in this change of seismic proportions to the island. Because we weren't, the RFP and contract are rife with service limitations that the county's answers blithely explain away by saying "This is at the discretion of the provider."

2) Some RFP requirements have gone by the wayside. As examples:

- The RFP said that applicants should be experienced ferry operators. Lowcountry Ferry has NO experience running a ferry service. In fact, this company was incorporated on October 20, 2023 - the same day the owner submitted his RFP Response to the County!

In spite of his lack of ferry service, the Lowcountry Ferry owner never bothered to ride the previous public ferry to get a firsthand view of that service, didn't participate in the county's RFP applicant's Q&A session, and misspelled the name of our island throughout his entire application. No red flags were raised?

We are also troubled by the apparent lack of scrutiny of his other companies, including the extensive list of legal cases he has been and continues to be a party to, and the "F" rating by the Better Business Bureau of his Hilton Head Harbor RV Resort and Marina company.

- Lowcountry Ferry's RFP response said that a one-way ferry trip would take 45 minutes. But now the company owner says this trip may take up to 1.5 hours in order to save fuel costs, and the Interim Administrator supports his

flip-flop on this issue. With boarding and disembarking time, residents must now be prepared for 3.5 hours of total travel time to go to the mainland. As a result, the jobs of some residents are at risk. Those residents who work on the other side must now limit their work schedules to 11:30 am – 3:30 pm. On the flip side, it's already difficult enough to convince service providers to come over here, and now it will be much more challenging. In fact, even some of Beaufort County's own employees have stated that they will not come to Daufuskie if required to ride this boat!

- The RFP said that riders must own or lease two temperature-controlled commercial ferry boats to be approved by the county. After execution of the ferry contract, Lowcountry Ferry began renting at least 3 catamaran boats with no temperature-controlled cabins nor many other ferry necessities and safety features. The stories about nightmarish rides in freezing weather are endless. The Interim Administrator says he approved "the boat." Which one? Did he inspect all the boats used by Daufuskie residents during the past month? What criteria did he use? Where's the documentation? His action on this matter alone shows an apparent indifference for our residents' comfort and safety

There is also a contract requirement that all contractors must be approved. The catamarans were provided by two different companies, often with those companies' crews. Where is the documentation for those approvals by the County?

Perhaps most importantly, weeks after Lowcountry Ferry was awarded this contract, the Interim Administrator announced that the company was finally purchasing a boat, one that was in Florida. The Manatee II is not a commercial ferry vessel as required by the contract, but rather an excursion vessel with little room for cargo, with no ADA accommodations, and clearly not suitable for ferrying purposes.

- What county official approved this boat, sight unseen? What criteria was used and where's the documentation?
- Why is the county now saying Lowcountry Ferry has met his contractual obligations of having two approved boats that are supposed to be commercial ferries? What's the second boat? Is it the catamaran that he has been renting for the past few weeks?

## **II. The application submitted by the Lowcountry owner contained false information.**

In its RFP Response, Lowcountry Ferry claimed access to two ferry boats, the Palmetto Trader and Palmetto Merchant, when in fact both boats were, and presently remain, under lease to the Haig Point Ferry Company. The owner of the boats states that there existed a "non-binding Letter of Intent" (LOI) with Lowcountry Ferry to enter into discussions, under certain circumstances and within certain parameters, but no contractual commitment existed to sell or purchase either of the two vessels.

We firmly believe that the County's claim in Mr. Lawson's communication that the LOI was a purchase agreement is simply wrong. However, this can easily be resolved by the County releasing that letter for public scrutiny. (The letter, by the way, was only submitted by Lowcountry Ferry in late November, one month after the RFP Response had been submitted.)

## **III. What did the County do after learning that Lowcountry Ferry included false information in its RFP response?**

Even AFTER the County learned that Lowcountry Ferry did not have the boats that were included in its RFP response, the bid was neither rejected nor re-scored. The County Administrator instead recommended that Lowcountry Ferry be approved as Daufuskie's official ferry service provider, which the Council did in executive session. In other words, Lowcountry Ferry won the bid by falsely claiming boats as his that were actually under lease to his bidding competitor, and was rewarded by getting the contract.

We have to ask: Did this provider, with no ferry experience, demonstrate the financial capability to secure the required vessels and cover operating costs? He has yet to purchase the two commercial ferry boats he said he would have. Can he afford them? Does he have enough operating capital to get through the slower months? Does he have a

vessel to get the overflow cargo to the island as promised? Has he provided the County with a business plan to show his projected streams of expenses and revenues, and particularly how much of those revenues will come from increased fees from residents and visitors? Or doesn't the County care about the financial impact on our community?

#### **IV. The Lowball Winning Bid Guarantees Draconian Service Reductions and Increased Fees**

Undoubtedly, County officials were attracted by a bid that was roughly one-third of the next highest bid. We believe that such an extreme variation in bids warranted additional discussions to determine how the bidder expected to achieve such significant cost savings. Not surprisingly, Daufuskie ferry riders soon learned they would be required to pay substantial new fees, and also that ticket prices might be increased next year. Everything from pet fees, to charges for missed boats, to fees for groceries and cargo beyond a modest amount are all now being imposed. As an example, two 30-pound bags of dog food might now cost someone an additional \$50 in transport fees.

A recent survey of Daufuskie ferry riders revealed that these extra fees are estimated to cost each family an average increase of almost \$2000 a year. This is a tax increase by any other name, and an extremely regressive one, impacting our island's working people, the elderly, and low-income residents.

#### **V. The Manatee II**

This week the Manatee II was launched by Lowcountry Ferry. Again, this is not a commercial ferry vessel as required by the contract. Rather, it's a fishing/excursion vessel with very little space for grocery wagons and other cargo. The top deck is not equipped for seated passengers, and people with their pets will need to sit or stand on the floor without a cover and exposed to the elements.

Notwithstanding one of the "answers" in Mr. Lawson's email, there are safety concerns, including a large step for both entering the boat and into the cabin. We have a video showing one of our senior residents almost falling into the water trying to get out of the boat. A crew member did not know where the life jackets were, but ultimately they were found in a bin on the top level of the boat, and are certainly not readily available should there be an accident. An expired fire extinguisher was spotted.

Hopefully these and other problems will be fixed, but we are concerned that the owner finds it acceptable to place our residents at risk with these dangerous safety hazards.

#### **VI. Cargo Problems: What's the Plan?**

Lack of space for groceries and other household supplies is a major concern, and we have heard of no plan for addressing this situation. At this time, small roll-on wagons are allowed onto the Manatee II without charge. But goods that don't fit into a wagon or when there is no room on the Manatee II (keeping in mind the extremely limited cargo space) will have to come on a later boat, which may not be deployed until the following day. And of course the rider will have to pay stiff new fees to get these goods over.

We have yet to see a barge service or extra boat materialize to transport excess supplies. It will be impossible to bring all resident wagons onto the Manatee II when the boat is even half full. This situation will only get much, much worse when the tourist season begins. Was transport of essential cargo ever discussed with the Lowcountry owner before his bid was approved?

#### **VII. Our Most Vulnerable People Are Being Hurt the Most**

The island's low-income and senior citizens have the most to lose with this new boat system. Those who have physical limitations and/or are on fixed incomes are the most concerned of any in our community. Daufuskie's entire Historic District is designated as a National Historic Registry place because of its strong Gullah history and culture. But many of these people are now elderly and are living very simply with limited means. They are particularly challenged by the Lowcountry Ferry voicemail that is either full or their messages aren't returned, and (especially for those without computers) with the bureaucratic online process established for reservations and payments. It is

notable that almost all our Gullah residents turned out to attend the meetings with the Lowcountry Ferry owner and with Councilman Lawson.

Do Council Members really want to be responsible for life becoming more difficult for these highly-valued residents?

### **VIII. Impact on Tourism**

Tourism is the life-blood of Daufuskie. It's not just one of the economic drivers of the island, in fact virtually every business is directly impacted by vacationers and day tourists. Convincing tourists to visit Daufuskie in spite of the extra costs, time, and inconvenience is already challenging. Vacation home owners and property managers now have to tell prospective guests that the boat time will be up to 1.5 hours each way, that they will almost certainly be charged several hundred dollars in fees for their groceries and luggage, and that their belongings may very well not arrive until the following day.

We have already started to see the chilling impact of the new ferry system on tourism. The recent Daufuskie survey revealed that 67% of property managers surveyed have already experienced cancellations due to the change in ferry service or guests' inability to book using the Lowcountry Ferry website for a total revenue loss of \$7700. One of the "answers" in Mr. Lawson's email indicated that being able to book ferry reservations only until April is acceptable. Is the County aware that many potential visitors are already planning their summer vacations?

For day tourists, we expect to see a dramatic drop-off when they realize that their total boat time has gone from 1.5 hours to up to 3 hours, leaving little time to tour around the island before they have to return.

We do not see that any consideration was given to tourism in developing the RFP, and even less once the new owner started to operate. This new system has a strong potential to be catastrophic for our island's economy.

### **Our Closing Plea**

If the current ferry provider is allowed to continue for the full five years of his contract, we all may look back and say that we were there when Daufuskie's fragile economic system suffered irreparable harm and collapsed. And that we were there when tourism dramatically decreased, when small businesses closed, when longtime residents left the island, when the quality of life declined for the island's working people, the elderly, and low-income residents, when property values fell, and when the modest economic gains from the previous few years were wiped out.

**Please terminate your contract with this provider who has promised services he will not and can not provide. Let us once again have a regular, reliable, and affordable ferry service. We pledge to work with you over the next year in seeking a long term solution to Daufuskie's ferry situation, including seeking outside funding and grants.**

Finally, we ask the following questions of each member of the County Council:

Is your commitment to "staying the course" with the Interim Administrator and the new ferry operator worth the price that Daufuskie Island is paying - and will be paying for many years to come? Will this be part of your legacy as a County Council Member?

Only you can answer these questions. But we hope you will do the right thing and the smart thing by choosing to support the Daufuskie Island community.

Respectfully, from the following Daufuskie Island full and part-time residents, other property owners, and small business people,

Della Gentile	Heather Yeh	Patti Shannon
Traci Grant	Edward Yeh	Stephen Shannon
Wesley Carl Grant	Tom Peth	Robert Crovo
Chris James	Linda Peth	Sharessa Crovo
Mike Andrews	Javonne Green	Holly Weeks
Cathy Andrews	Amoret Klene	Pat Beichler
Sara Deitch	Jim Klene	Brad Pierce
Ed Campbell	Wendy Nelthorpe	Molly Pierce
Paula Harrold	David Campbell	Ken Berry
Jim Harrold	Teresita Mobley	Durema Berry
Ryan McEntee	Dennis Mobley	Juli Dilullo
Lauren McEntee	Barbie Mosley	Nino Dilullo
Matthew keller	Brad Neese	Michael Reed
Victoria Price	Jennifer Neese	Vanessa Bramlett
Laura Furfari	Kristy Moller	Dan Peterson
Adam Furfari	Beverly Davis	Becky Peterson
Bruce Westendorf	Sonny Timmerman	Jon Stair
Diana Westendorf	Pat Allison	Tina Stair
Kevin Scott	Maree Hanson	Joe Walsh
Cindy Scott	Sylvia Wampler	Elizabeth Walsh
Sue Sabolsky	Ted Biggs	Martha Hutton
Scott Sabolsky	Carol Biggs	Drew Slater
Jennifer Matvija	Jennifer Adams	Leslie Slater
Rick Matvija	Hope Shafer	Stacie Sizemore
Chris Miller	Miles Shafer	Kent Sizemore
Cathy Miller	Joe Czul	Deborah McKeeman
Bruce Jamrozy	Jeanine Czul	David McKeeman
Desi Jamrozy	Scott Smith	Eddie Pennebaker
Chuck Hill	Sara Smith	Jennifer Adams
Terri Hill	Deborah McKeeman	Erin Quinn
Bill Crabtree	Dave McKeeman	Jeremy Quinn
Tanya Crabtree	James Brackett	Julie Pennebaker
Casey Cregan	Kimberly Parker	Leslie Norton
Len Pjednic	James Edens	Pam Cobb
Eileen Pojednic	Margaret Palmer	Brian Cobb
Heather Yeh	Woody Palmer	Robert Crovo
Edward Yah	Brittany Weaver	Sharessa Crovo
Sharon Havird	Taylor Weaver	Georgia Roseberry
Eddie Havird	Jackie Beasley	Paula Kormendi
Sandy Hutton	William Sheaf	Pat McClain
Jeff Bierline	Michele Sheaf	Molly McClain
Kristen Bierline	Pat Ingoldsby	Matt Marziale

Sharon Pulcini  
David Pulcini  
Cynthia Chism  
Deborah Smith  
Melissa Davis  
Aaron Crosby  
Jan Crosby  
Jeremy Collins  
Glenda Roberts  
Billy Roberts  
Taylor Moran  
Paul Wolfe  
John Van Horn  
Susan Van Horn  
Bruce Carter  
Debbie Roberson  
Dean Roberson  
Kevin Scott  
Kathy Greene  
Bernie Grunder  
Geoff Brunning  
Jodi Brunning  
Stewart Yarborough  
Laura Pojednic-Cregan

Tonya Linse  
Robb Hudson  
Jennifer Hudson  
Jessie Wolfe-Parsons  
Tammy Kelley  
Pete Finazzo  
Kimberly Finazzo  
Michele Mellett  
Anthony Cappuccio  
Mau Plascencia  
Michael Gelsomine  
Giavanna Gelsomine  
John Hinchey  
Paulette Hinchey  
Robert Fountain  
Megan Fountain  
Cathie Moore  
Wallace Watson  
Sheryl Gravelle-Camelo  
Gerry Camelo  
Darlene Zuege  
Mike Zuege  
Karen Quinn  
Kent Wicker

Bill Werkheiser  
Andrea Werkheiser  
John Thompson  
Carole Thompson  
Michael Duplantis  
Gretchen Duplantis  
William Brennan  
Alicia Brennan  
TJ Wasser  
Vicky Wasser  
Cleve Bryan  
Denise Gilbert  
Dr Yvonne Mitchell  
Dennis Michali  
Adam Martin  
Freddie Grant  
David Dreyer  
Sallie Dreyer  
Karla Clark  
Steve Clark  
Mason Clark  
Clarence Simmons  
Cathy Price