

Editorial: Hilton Head obligated to get dirt roads paved

By ISLAND PACKET

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The Town of Hilton Head Island officials have continuously failed to prioritize the paving of dirt roads despite pleas from taxpaying, full-time residents, most of whom are native islanders. Instead, it has spent generously on non-basic projects and services.

Paving these dirt roads isn't about improving aesthetics. It is about increasing safety. Police cars, fire trucks and ambulances can have a difficult time navigating the bumpy paths. Response times can be delayed.

The roads also pose dangers for resident drivers who must pick around potholes and avoid patches of mud. Residents say that when it rains, they have a hard time getting down the roads to work or get their children to school.

An affluent town such as Hilton Head, which has the means to fix this problem, is obligated to do so. Basic services such as paved roads, access to sewer lines and running water are not niceties. They're basic necessities that even limited-services towns such as Hilton Head are obligated to provide to its citizens.

Town leaders give many reasons why the work has not been done.

Some say it's Beaufort County's responsibility. And indeed, for many years, the county shouldered the burden of acquiring and paving roads on the island. But the pace was always too slow, and the town failed in its obligation to seek out ways to help pick up the pace.

Finally, in 2009, county leaders said they would discontinue the practice of paving on the island. While the town has since begun its own paving program, it is underfunded and its paving progress sluggish.

The most commonly cited reason for the lack of paving is that it can involve pricey and time-consuming legal work. Many native islanders who want their roads paved live on heirs' property. Their ancestors bought or received land after the Civil War, and the property has been passed down through the generations without a valid will or title transfer. So the land belongs to all heirs, not just those who live on it or who pays taxes on it.

The town must track down each heir before paving can begin. Some heirs voluntarily donate land for the project. Others fight it because they like the rural feel of their area. Still others demand compensation for their land, which triggers a court process during which a judge determines the appropriate amount of compensation.

As a result, it can take years and thousands of dollars in unbudgeted legal costs to pave a mile of road. Case in point: Jonesville Road. Town officials estimated it would cost less than \$100,000 to acquire 53 small parcels of land and pave the road. Ultimately, it took six years to clear legal claims from a staggering 500 property owners, and it cost \$600,000.

Instead of becoming discouraged, Town Council must use the Jonesville paving project as a lesson on how to work smarter to get the work done.

For example, now that the town knows the projects take a long time, it should start early and increase funds designated for paving purposes.

Funding possibilities include federal grants and increasing the stormwater fee currently charged to all residents.

It could also create a nonprofit to help citizens clear their heirs' property, which would alleviate some of the hassle and cost.

It's a matter of making paving a priority. Budget discussions get underway in May, and we call on Town Council to give this long-ignored issue -- and the native-islander community -- attention. Newly elected Mayor David Bennett and council member Marc Grant have made paving projects a priority, and we wish them well in convincing the other members of council.

A 1995 American Institute of Architects study by one of its Regional Urban Design Assistance Teams made many of these same suggestions. And yet the town chose to ignore them, concentrating instead on bringing water and sewer lines to much of the island. We applaud these successful efforts. Life on the island is better for all because of the work.

Now it's time to do the same for dirt roads.

Let's not let another 20 years pass before the town finishes the work

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