

Hilton Head PSD tackling major initiatives in 2006

**By Richard Cyr
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As a resident of Hilton Head Plantation, your drinking water is provided to you by the Hilton Head Public Service District (PSD). The PSD also operates and maintains the public sewer system that serves Hilton Head Plantation. The PSD is a customer-owned public utility that is governed by a seven-member Commission elected by our customers. It is our pleasure to once again report to you on the work your PSD has performed over the past year.

The year 2006 has seen several key achievements for the PSD. The highlights are:

- Our strong emphasis on debt reduction continues. Over the past three years, the PSD has reduced its system debt by \$8.5 million, or nearly 16 percent. We have reduced future interest payments by \$12.1 million, or 37 percent. We also have sliced our debt service by \$20.6 million, or nearly 27 percent.
- The elected PSD Commission pushed for and achieved state legislation that moves our Commission elections to even-numbered years so that they coincide with municipal, state, and federal elections. This move was aimed at helping to increase voter turnout, allowing voters the opportunity to make choices about an array of representation with one trip to the polls.
- Our strong partnership with the Town of Hilton Head Island continues. The PSD is working alongside the Town government on issues such as extension of the public sewer system, future water supply, sewer and water installation projects, seeking grants for sewer projects, and maintenance of the Jarvis Creek stormwater pump station. The ultimate beneficiaries of this cooperation are our mutual customers – the residents and businesses of Hilton Head Island.

Water and site safety improvements in Hilton Head Plantation

Two projects completed this year had a direct impact on Hilton Head Plantation. First, the drinking water distribution systems that serve Hilton Head Plantation and Palmetto Hall Plantation were connected. This project was part of a series of projects completed during 2005 and 2006 that resulted in the PSD being able to operate our water distribution system as one system. Previously, two different systems comprised your Hilton Head PSD water distribution system. The result of this new interconnectivity is improved water pressure and water quality.

The second project directly affecting Hilton Head Plantation is a series of safety improvements at our Royal James Drive property, the site of the former Hilton Head

Plantation Utilities wastewater treatment plant and office. The PSD began removing defunct equipment at the site and securing other parts of the plant infrastructure. Part of this site already has been leased to the Hilton Head Plantation POA for expanded RV and boat parking.

Your PSD also has been tackling two major issues in 2006. The first is the identification and development of a future drinking water supply for the island. The second issue is the extension of the public sewer system throughout our service area.

Middle Floridan Aquifer targeted for future water supply

The PSD provides you with “blended” drinking water. That means that about half of our water supply comes from our own groundwater wells here on the island, while the other half is purchased wholesale by the PSD from the Beaufort-Jasper Water & Sewer Authority (BJWSA). BJWSA provides treated surface water from the Savannah River. Our groundwater wells are dug into the 150-foot-deep Upper Floridan Aquifer. Unfortunately, saltwater intrusion continues to threaten our Upper Floridan groundwater wells. Saltwater intrusion is a process whereby saltwater enters the fresh water aquifer that supplies your drinking water. While this saltwater does not pose a health risk, it does adversely affect the aesthetics of the drinking water.

The PSD has been developing a new source of drinking water to combat the saltwater intrusion. The new source is the 500-foot-deep Middle Floridan Aquifer. The PSD would need to build a reverse osmosis treatment plant to remove the salt found in the Middle Floridan. Reverse osmosis treatment is not new to Hilton Head Island. The South Island Public Service District currently uses it to treat groundwater from the very deep Cretaceous Aquifer.

We feel it is critical to develop this new source of drinking water for several reasons. First, scientific research conducted by the states of South Carolina and Georgia, as well as the U.S. Geological Survey, indicates that the saltwater intrusion we are experiencing on Hilton Head will continue into the foreseeable future. Research has shown that the Savannah region’s over-pumping of the aquifer has combined with naturally occurring processes to cause the saltwater intrusion. The State of Georgia’s limitations on pumping are insufficient to stem the saltwater intrusion, and it will continue to impact Hilton Head.

Another reason to develop an alternative source of drinking water is the potential for increases in the wholesale water rate the PSD is charged by BJWSA for its treated Savannah River water. The PSD in 2005 was hit with a 17-percent hike in the wholesale rate. We chose to absorb this increase rather than pass it on to our customers. However, we are concerned that our ability to absorb future wholesale rate hikes could be limited.

We have worked alongside the State’s Department of Health and Environmental Control and our own groundwater expert, Dr. Richard Spruil of East Carolina University, to develop this new source of drinking water. The PSD has obtained permission from the

State to withdraw water from the Middle Floridan Aquifer. We also are evaluating proposals to build the reverse osmosis treatment plant, which would be located on Jenkins Island on land provided by the Town of Hilton Head Island. At present, we estimate the reverse osmosis plant could be in operation by 2008.

Extension of public sewer system continues in 2006

The PSD serves the north- and mid-island areas of Hilton Head, from Windmill Harbor to the Hilton Head Resort. Many residents are surprised to learn that about 20 percent of properties in the PSD's service area do not have access to the public sewer system, relying instead upon septic tanks that are ill suited to the island's high groundwater table and sandy soils. Numerous septic tank failures have been documented on the island. These failures can pollute our soils and even our groundwater, posing a threat to both public health and the island's ecology.

The PSD in 2004 embarked upon a 10-year plan aimed at extending sewer access to all properties in the district. Several key developments have occurred over the past year to boost this effort.

First, the PSD approved the use of low-pressure sewer systems in our service area. Low-pressure sewer systems, which utilize a small grinder pump and pressurized line, are ideal for existing neighborhoods because they can be installed without the need for costly and disruptive road reconstruction, unlike a gravity sewer system that involves burying larger sewer mains. Low-pressure sewer is not new to the South Carolina coast, where the Myrtle Beach area has thousands of such units in operation.

The Oak Marsh subdivision off Spanish Wells Road is the first neighborhood on the island to receive a low-pressure sewer system. Oak Marsh property owners had been experiencing problems with failing septic systems in their marshfront subdivision and contacted the PSD about installing sewer service. Low-pressure sewer was a desirable option for Oak Marsh homeowners, who did not want the disruption of having their roads torn up and rebuilt in order to lay gravity sewer mains. Several other neighborhoods that currently rely upon septic systems already have informed the PSD that they want low-pressure sewer installed.

The Town of Hilton Head Island is an active partner with the PSD in this sewer extension effort. The Town has joined the PSD and an array of community partners in seeking grant funding to extend sewer service to low-income property owners. In July, the Town was awarded a \$469,615 Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) by the State of South Carolina. This grant funding will help complete a sewer project to provide sewer access to the Squire Pope Road area.

Yet another boost to the sewer extension effort came when the Town announced plans to extend to sewer service to all of its parks; a move that helps extend the public sewer system to previously unserved areas. A project to extend sewer service to Green Shell Park off Squire Pope Road is being coordinated with the CDBG sewer project.

The PSD has worked with entities such as the Community Foundation of the Lowcountry and Project SAFE (Sewer Access for Everyone) to apply for more than \$2.5 million in grants to assist low-income homeowners with the cost of sewer connection. In June, the PSD received a grant for \$13,000 thanks to the work of State Rep. Richard Chalk, who requested the grant money through the South Carolina General Assembly's Competitive Grants program. The \$13,000 has been placed with Project SAFE, which provides connection assistance to qualified applicants.

Your Hilton Head PSD is committed to providing you with top-quality drinking water and a state-of-the-art reclaimed water system. We take extreme pride in providing these essential services that are critical to the protection of both public health and our island environment. Our Customer Service Center and Reclaimed Water Plant are located at 21 Oak Park Drive, off Mathews Drive. Please drop by and visit us for a tour of the Reclaimed Water Plant. We can be reached at (843) 681-5525 or info@hhpsd.com, or visit us on the Web at www.hhpsd.com. We'd love to hear from you.