

From: Maybank, Burnet R. III <BMaybank@nexsenpruet.com>
To: Maybank, Burnet R. III <BMaybank@nexsenpruet.com>
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Charleston County votes to withhold funding from industry-recruiting group until issues resolved



Warren L. Wise Email @warrenlancewise

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Charleston County Council formally put its stamp on withholding funds from the Lowcountry's main industry-recruiting agency Tuesday until differences can be resolved.

With eight members voting to hold on to the county's \$500,000 contribution to help lure industry to the Lowcountry and Joe Qualey voting to abstain, the Charleston Regional Development Alliance must now pin its hopes on a meeting set up early next month to work out a range of issues.

The alliance, which includes Berkeley, Charleston and Dorchester, will meet with county representatives and state Commerce Secretary Bobby Hitt Sept. 10 to try to sew up the behind-the-scenes rift that surfaced this summer.

Berkeley put \$258,000 in its budget last month for the alliance, with a provision to withhold the bulk of it until differences are resolved. Dorchester reduced its level of funding to \$50,000 from \$173,000 last year, citing funding cuts and questioning results.

The counties claim they don't have enough representation on the alliance for the amount of money they contribute, question the return on their investment, don't want the alliance involved in existing industry expansions and don't want to rubber-stamp deals at the last minute.

Representatives of the alliance, well represented at the council meeting with former chairmen, board members and staff present, welcomed the idea of a formal sit down.

"It was a cordial conversation," said alliance chairman Lonnie Carter, also president and CEO of state-owned utility Santee Cooper. "I think we are moving in the right direction."

In his remarks to the full council, Carter emphasized the importance of working together as a region as the counties have done since 1995 to attract industry and jobs to the Lowcountry.

"This would not be the time to shift to a divided, fractured approach," Carter said. "If you are not playing as a team, you are going to lose."

He recognized the need for better communication and expressed a willingness to talk out differences.

"We are committed to improving our relations with Charleston County," he said. "Everything is on the table."

The vote to hold alliance funding came two weeks after Charleston County Council Chairman Teddie Pryor said the county was out of the group and would no longer be a paying member. Some council members last week pushed for open discussion and a formal vote.

He and other council members sounded a more conciliatory tone Tuesday.

"I think we are a few days from being where we need to be. We are this close together," said Pryor, holding his hands a few inches apart.

"We want to get shoulder to shoulder with y'all and get back on the same page," Councilman Elliott Summey said. "I'm hoping we can figure this out in the next week or two. Let's get this behind us."

Councilwoman Colleen Condon went straight to the point.

"(Charleston County's economic development director) Steve Dykes is our go-to guy. Make sure your organization works in lock step with him," she said to the alliance. "I'm hoping we can cut a check soon."

The alliance operates on a \$3.1 million budget. The group's 11-member executive committee met last week to consider contingency plans in case full funding doesn't come through this year. Those plans could include tapping into savings, cutting staff or bringing in a consultant to develop a new business model. The agency is funded from government aid and private businesses. It has about 60 members, called investors.

While hoping emergency measures aren't needed, Carter said the agency will continue to operate "with whatever resources we have regardless of funding. We obviously will have to scale back (without full funding.)"

Reach Warren L. Wise at 937-5524 or twitter.com/warrenlancewise.

Burnet R. Maybank, III

Nexsen Pruet, LLC

1230 Main Street, Suite 700 (29201)

P.O. Drawer 2426

Columbia, SC 29202

T: 803.540.2048, F: 803.253.8277

Cell: 803.960.3024

bmaybank@nexsenpruet.com

www.nexsenpruet.com

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