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Beaufort County Council, Southern Carolina Alliance discuss potential partnership

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• [Photos](#)

[Back](#) | [Next](#)



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Members of Beaufort County Council met with representatives from the Southern Carolina Alliance about a potential future economic development partnership on Monday.

[Back](#) | [Next](#)



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Southern Carolina Alliance director Danny Black gives an overview of the organization to Beaufort County Council's governmental committee on Monday.

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While a decision isn't likely for another couple of months, Beaufort County Council is interested in partnering with a regional, six-county economic alliance.

At the same time, board members of that alliance say they would be more welcoming to Beaufort County if it can achieve a more unified position on its future direction of economic development.

On Monday, County Council's governmental committee met with representatives of the Southern Carolina Alliance to launch a conversation aimed at determining if the two parties are a good fit for each other.

The initial meeting comes after council narrowly decided by a 6-5 vote in October to continue funding its

current chief economic development partner, the Lowcountry Economic Alliance, through the end of this fiscal year. While several council members have criticized the LEA, which partnered with the county in 2011, for a lack of results, they have also said the county could benefit from the SCA's focus on regionalism. The SCA, a regional network consisting of elected officials and economic development leaders from Jasper, Hampton, Colleton, Allendale, Barnwell and Bamberg counties, was formed in 1996 and owns and operates several multi-county industrial parks throughout the region.

The group, funded through a roughly equal combination of public and private funds, also markets any available industrial buildings, parks and sites within the six-county radius and allocates resources to workforce development, alliance director Danny Black said.

"You have to do product development because today, if you don't have shovel-ready sites or a park or building, you're out of luck," Black said. "So you need to develop product, and you have to develop the workforce that companies will want to come in and employ."

Since its inception, the alliance has obtained more than \$900 million in capital investment along with \$15 million in grant funding, and it has helped create more than 3,700 jobs in its service area, Black said. He pointed to Kronotex USA, a German-based laminate flooring company and Grant Forest Products of Allendale, which has since been purchased by Augusta, Ga.-based Georgia-Pacific, as two key successes. At the time they were announced in 2000 and 2005, respectively, the companies were two of South Carolina's top 10 economic development projects in capital investment in the last 20 years, Black said.

Council members agreed more meetings would be needed to flesh out details over a potential partnership. "We've got about six months left in our fiscal year, and then we're going to have to make a real decision on what to do with economic development," Councilman Tabor Vaux said. "I think this could be a real opportunity for us, and we need to look into it, do a little more homework and have some more discussions amongst ourselves."

Councilman Rick Caporale said he, too, was impressed with what he's seen and heard so far from the SCA. "On the surface, it looks like an amazing track record," he said.

If Beaufort County were to partner with the alliance, it would pay a membership fee and appoint three members to the alliance's board of directors. While the county would pay for its personnel, the alliance would cover their training and recruitment and business trips, Black said.

After the county agreed to join the alliance and the alliance board approved the union, Black said he would examine all potential economic development sites in the county and determine what industries the alliance should prioritize for the area.

"It would be a 30- to 60-day period of intense discovery," Black said, "to see what product we could put on the ground here immediately."

While alliance board members present at Monday's meeting said the alliance could benefit from Beaufort County's larger population, broader workforce, attraction from a livability standpoint and increased statewide political clout, they also would be more likely to support a partnership if the county is unified and firmly committed.

"There's great potential here, but the ability for you to communicate and cooperate on the front end will mean backing off the personalities that drive some of the political activities here," said Bill Workman, a Colleton County board member and former Bluffton town manager.

"The definition of success in Beaufort County is different than the other counties. That doesn't mean we can't do a great job working together, but you've got to get beyond some of these disagreements (over economic development)."

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