

Title: Coastal Carolina's two biggest football fans
 Author: BY PHILLIP CEASE
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Legislature

Coastal Carolina's two biggest football fans

BY PHILLIP CEASE

The term "legislative state" gets thrown around a lot by people trying to describe the power structure for South Carolina's government. It's supposed to make the state's gross imbalance of power seem like a reasonable alternative – a "legislative state," as opposed to an "executive state," sounds like a legitimate thing.

Another problem with the term, however, is that it implies the entire legislature runs the state. In fact, a better argument can be made that a small group of legislative leaders run it. Consider the recent controversy over the expansion of Coastal Carolina's stadium.

First, some context. Coastal Carolina University decided to move from the Big South to the Sun Belt Conference. In order to make this switch, university officials needed to increase the size of the school's stadium and wanted to issue bonds to cover the construction cost.

The Commission on Higher Education (CHE) first had to approve the bond request, but the agency denied it – four times – citing insufficient funding to cover the bond debt and a board member's own experience with the unforeseen costs of switching conferences. Normally that would be the end of the story. But thanks to that small group of powerful legislators in Columbia, Coastal Carolina will get its stadium expansion.

At the very end of the budget process, legislators slipped in two provisos (laws that expire at the end of the fiscal year) that allowed Coastal Carolina to circumvent the CHE's decision. The provisos were sponsored by Ways and Means Chairman Brian White (R-Anderson). In the conference committee for the budget, Senate Finance chairman Hugh Leather-

man (R-Florence) agreed to the House provisos. They were included in the final budget.

(Why Leatherman and White went out of their way to assist Coastal Carolina in this way is unclear – the school is not located in either lawmaker's district. It's worth noting that CCU has spent \$15,000 on lobbying in 2016.)

Gov. Nikki Haley vetoed the provisos, noting in her veto message that Coastal Carolina "deployed an aggressive lobbying effort to bypass CHE's statutory responsibility to review and consider higher education capital projects, resulting in this proviso." She went on: "The project, primarily funded by tuition-backed debt, nearly doubled in cost since its original proposal last fall."

The governor's vetoes were overwhelmingly overridden in the House. In the Senate, one proviso was sustained – meaning the Senate agreed with the governor's veto. But 10 minutes later, Senate leaders, evidently unhappy with the result, moved to reconsider – a parliamentary maneuver allowing the chamber to take up a veto again even though members already sustained it. Both White and Leatherman voted to override the vetoes in their respective chambers.

The next step for Coastal Carolina was to go before the Joint Bond Review Committee (JBRC), a body made up entirely of legislators. The chairman and vice chairman of the JBRC are none other than Sen. Leatherman and Rep. White, respectively. The committee approved the bond proposal.

After it was approved by the JBRC, the State Fiscal Accountability Authority (SFAA) voted 3-2 to allow the project to move forward. Leatherman and White are on that five-member board, too; they accounted

for two of the three "aye" votes.

In the end, White and Leatherman voted on the proposal no fewer than seven times. Four for White and three for Leatherman – and this doesn't include White's own amendment that introduced the two provisos.

The governor, meanwhile – who, unlike White and Leatherman, is elected by the entire state, not merely by a single legislative district – only got to act on the measure twice: first with a veto, second with a vote on the SFAA. In both cases, she was outgunned by two legislative leaders.

Maybe the best term isn't "legislative state" after all. Maybe we should refer to South Carolina an "oligarchic state."

Consider Leatherman. The Florence lawmaker has at least 46 boards and commission seats he either serves on or can appoint to. On some boards he appoints more than one member – for example the powerful Judicial Merit Selection Committee, which nominates judicial candidates to the legislature for election.

A few years ago when the legislature passed and the governor signed a government restructuring bill that supposedly "abolished" the Budget and Control Board, lawmakers and other politicians cheered the "historic" victory for accountability. Judging by the CCU stadium controversy, however, the end results of the new restructuring law were (a) that the Budget and Control Board has a new name – it's the SFAA now – and (b) that the oligarchy remains firmly in place.

But if you're a small university wanting to fund a stadium expansion, an oligarchy is just what you may need.

■
The writer is director of research at the South Carolina Policy Council.

Title: **Plan surfaces for new SC site**
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 Size: 64.48 column inches
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NUCLEAR DISPOSAL

Plan surfaces for new SC site

■ Group's proposal would allow spent fuel to be moved from the state's four nuclear power plant sites to be stored at the new facility.

BY SAMMY FRETWELL
AND JEFF WILKINSON
sfretwell@thestate.com
jwilkinson@thestate.com

A plan has surfaced to establish another nuclear waste disposal ground in South Carolina, a state with a history of taking atomic refuse from across the country.

An organization called the Spent Fuel Reprocessing Group wants federal approval to open a disposal area near Barnwell and the Savannah River Site nuclear weapons complex. Spent fuel, a type of highly radioactive waste, would be moved from the state's four nuclear power plant sites and stored indefinitely at the new facility, records show.

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission in July received notice

of the plan. The proposal is a long way from becoming reality, but if eventually approved by the federal government, it would create a place for nuclear waste disposal that is likely to draw opposition.

Several environmental groups said this week they are preparing to fight any effort to create what they called an atomic waste dumping ground. Politicians, including Gov. Nikki Haley, also expressed reservations Monday.

The subject of nuclear waste disposal is a touchy one in South Carolina because many people say the state has shouldered more than its share of the nuclear waste bur-

den.

South Carolina already stores highly radioactive material from around the country and world at the Savannah River Site. It also has a low-level waste dump in Barnwell County that was used for decades to bury nuclear garbage from power plants across the country. That site has leaked radioactive tritium into groundwater.

Now, the government is being asked to allow a disposal site for high-level nuclear waste from power plants in South Carolina. The site would be near the Barnwell

SEE NUCLEAR, 2A

FROM PAGE 1A

NUCLEAR

low-level waste dump, environmentalists said Monday.

"I'd like to learn more, but I'm sure there will be considerable concern," state Rep. James Smith, D-Richland, said.

Contacted Monday, Haley's office said: "South Carolina will not become a permanent dumping ground for nuclear waste regardless of where it

would be housed or who would house it."

Supporters of the disposal site plan could not be reached Monday. But records show enthusiastic support from the Spent Fuel Reprocessing Group.

A letter the group sent to the NRC said the disposal ground is needed to help power companies get rid of nuclear waste, which is created in the

generation of electricity.

Duke Energy, which operates three of the four commercial nuclear plant sites in South Carolina, was not aware of the plan and declined comment. Attempts to reach SCE&G, which is building two new nuclear reactors at its Fairfield County power plant, were unsuccessful.

Mike Stake, a former president of the Aiken

County Tea Party, submitted the proposal listing himself as president of the Spent Fuel Reprocessing Group. He was not available Monday for comment.

In his proposal, dated July 26, Stake said the group would formally apply to the commission "at a later date" to "acquire or build a storage facility" near the Savan-

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According to the plan, the material could eventually be recycled for use in nuclear reactors.

Efforts to recycle, or reprocess spent fuel, have never taken off in the United States because the idea is so controversial. Reprocessing can create a waste stream that adds to the nation’s burden of atomic garbage, but boosters say reprocessing used nuclear fuel can be done safely and effectively.

“Though the spent fuel storage proposal is in its formative stages, we believe that it is totally unnecessary and potentially poses a host of environmental and health issues,” said Chris Hall, chair of executive committee of the South Carolina Chapter of the Sierra Club.

A spokeswoman for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission said the agency has never had any interaction with Stake or the group prior to receiving the July letter. Once an application is received, the commission could take three years or more to come to a decision, spokeswoman Maureen Conley said.

In addition to the commission review, the application could be required to undergo a public hearing process conducted by the Atomic Safety and Licensing Board.

Critics say developing an interim storage site is risky and could eventually mean South Carolina could be saddled with the material forever.

Environmentalists say there is no need to move spent nuclear fuel off of atomic power plant sites. They contend it can be stored safely. Transporting it to a disposal area near Barnwell would increase risks to the public,

they said. If a permanent disposal site were eventually developed nationally, the material would have to be transported again from the interim South Carolina site, according to Savannah River Site Watch, the S.C. League of Women Voters and the state Sierra Club.

“Packaging of the spent fuel for transport, unloading it at the consolidated storage site and eventually repackaging it to transport to a federal facility would unnecessarily pose a high economic cost and a logistical nightmare, both of which can be avoided if the spent fuel is left where it is now stored until such time as a geologic facility is available,” according to the groups.

What to do with the nation’s used nuclear fuel has been problematic. The government spent billions of dollars developing a permanent burial ground in Nevada, but nixed the idea after President Obama

took office. Since the Yucca Mountain plan was abandoned, nuclear power plants have had to store spent nuclear fuel on-site. Initially the fuel is kept in pools until it cools off. Then it is put into dry casks at the sites.

Utilities have for years expressed frustration the Yucca Mountain site is no longer an option, saying the federal government went back on a commitment to take the spent fuel off their hands.

U.S. Rep. Mick Mulvaney, R-S.C., has proposed legislation in Congress that would make it easier for utilities to ship used nuclear fuel to an interim storage site until a permanent site to replace Yucca Mountain is found. Interim sites have been discussed in Texas and New Mexico.

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COLUMBIA

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Title: **Jones among South Carolina Highway Patrol graduates**

Author:

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Jones among South Carolina Highway Patrol graduates

The South Carolina Highway Patrol graduated 45 troopers from Highway Patrol Basic Classes 98 and 99 on Thursday, Sept. 15. Among the graduates was Daniel S. Jones of Laurens. Jones has been assigned to Troop 3, Post B.

Gov. Nikki Haley once again addressed the graduates. "You now have earned the distinguished uniform, but the uniform doesn't earn you respect," Gov. Haley said. "You have to earn respect in your actions, in the way you interact with people, in your relationships within the communities in which you work ... You are probably coming into this job at one of the hardest times and as we see across the country, it is just getting harder and harder for law enforcement, but what I want you to know: we've got your backs."

The 98th class graduated from the S.C. Criminal Justice Academy on May 16, 2016. The

99th class graduated on Aug. 5, 2016. After graduating from the Academy, both classes continued on with specialized training from the Highway Patrol in all areas of law enforcement. The SCHP Basic Training Program consists of 21 weeks of extensive law enforcement training in-residence. After graduation, Troopers must complete additional field training: a minimum of six to eight weeks of field training.

"Those who choose to serve — whether it is in the armed forces or as law enforcement officers — are the ones who stand in the gap to protect us all

from crime and terrorism," said SCDPS Director Leroy Smith. "I am thankful that SCDPS is part of that brave group of men and women — our protectors. And today — we will have 45 more protectors throughout our state."

Highway Patrol Commander Col. Mike Oliver told graduates: "It isn't just about what you do in uniform but about adopting a lifestyle. These past 21 weeks, you have learned core values: selfless service, integrity, responsibility. Now, it is time to put those into practice. The life of a state trooper is demanding but equally rewarding."

The recent graduation brings the total number of troopers in South Carolina to 812, which includes 48 trooper trainees in the 100th Basic Class. Additional precertified officers will be joining the 100th Basic Class on Oct. 14. The Highway Patrol is currently hiring for the January 2017 class.



**Daniel S.
Jones**

Title: **UST Logical Systems bringing HQ to Main St.**
Author: AMANDA COYNE THE GREENVILLE NEWS
Size: 8.99 column inches
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UST Logical Systems bringing HQ to Main St.

AMANDA COYNE
THE GREENVILLE NEWS

UST Logical Systems is moving its headquarters from Hendersonville, North Carolina, to Greenville, South Carolina, according to a release from Gov. Nikki Haley's office.

The move will entail a \$1.6 million investment and 50 new jobs at 103 N. Main Street, along the One City Plaza.

The logistics and transport

company says the move is to accommodate continued growth.

The company's first day in the 6,000-square-foot office space was Monday.

They held a ribbon-cutting celebration Monday afternoon.

Hiring for new positions at the company's headquarters will begin at the end of this year. Those interested can visit the company's website.

Title: **ALSO...**
Author:
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**ALSO ...**

- Michelin is advancing its plans to establish a distribution center in Spartanburg County. The new development is projected to bring more than \$270 million in new capital investment and lead to the creation of 350 new jobs.

- UST Logistical Systems, a national third-party logistics company, is launching its first operations in Greenville County, Gov. Nikki Haley's office announced. The new development is projected to generate \$1.6 million in new capital investment and bring 50 jobs to the Upstate.

Established in 1998, UST is a third-party logistics company that specializes in the delivery of furniture and appliances.

- Issues on the Colonial Pipeline pressured gas prices higher in much of the Southeast with the Carolinas topping the nation's list of largest weekly increases: Alabama (+8 cents), South Carolina (+7 cents), North Carolina (+5 cents), Georgia (+3 cents). North Carolina's current average is \$2.21, while South Carolina's current average sits at \$2.11.

— ASSOCIATED PRESS, STAFF REPORTS

Title: **Haley creates new panel on vet issues**

Author:

Size: 8.21 column inches

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Haley creates new panel on vet issues

Gov. Nikki Haley is forming a new committee to advise state and local leaders on veterans' issues. An executive order signed Monday creates the Veterans Policy Advisory Committee. A similar veterans' study committee created by state law dissolved after issuing its report earlier this year. The new, 15-member group will make recommendations at least annually to the state's 30-member Military Base Task Force on policies that can best serve veterans' needs. South Carolina is home to 10 military installations. According to Haley's order, more than 400,000 veterans live in South Carolina. The new advisory group will include legislators, state agency directors, veterans and members of the Military Base Task Force, which is tasked with coordinating efforts to maintain South Carolina's military presence and advising the governor and legislators. — AP

Title: **GOP donorswarmup to Trump**
 Author: BY JAMIESELF jself@thestate.com
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THE BUZZ

GOP donors warm up to Trump

■ Some top S.C. GOP boosters are helping Donald Trump raise money. ... One candidate for governor is getting a head start on fundraising ... and someone missed the memo about S.C. roads.

BY JAMIE SELF
 jself@thestate.com

It has been a reluctant romance. But some top S.C. Republican fundraisers are coming around to **Donald Trump**.

Spartanburg financial consultant **Barry Wynn**, a leading booster for the Bush presidential campaigns, said the GOP presidential nominee's folks reached out to him for the first time in recent weeks.

The former S.C. GOP chairman said he would help raise money, but did not request any formal role on Trump's finance team.

"Don't need one, don't want one," Wynn said, adding he is happy to help as Trump's aides strive to reach the GOP's Old

FROM PAGE 3A

BUZZ

the nation to endorse Trump - would chair the candidate's S.C. fundraising committee.

The campaign is building a list of finance co-chairs who would give money or raise at least \$100,000 for Trump.

So far, they are:

● **Joe Taylor**: The S.C. commerce secretary under Gov. **Mark Sanford** and chief executive of Southland Capital Partners said he plans to make a "significant contribution" to Trump's efforts and help raise money. "I'm not sure that free enterprise can stand four more years or

Guard - to "bring in some of the wayward crowd."

"The galvanizing force there is (that) people just can't imagine the Clintons back in the White House," Wynn said.

Other top GOP boosters are keeping low profiles this go-around, too, only recently hearing from the Trump campaign.

"I'm gonna vote for Donald Trump, and I'm going to contribute some," said Florence doctor **Eddie Floyd**, a top GOP fundraiser for **George W. Bush** and, this year, a supporter of the failed bids for the GOP nomination by U.S. Sen. **Lindsey Graham** and **Jeb Bush**. "But I'm not actively involved in his

campaign."

David Wilkins, a former U.S. ambassador to Canada and S.C. House speaker, said he would be

happy to circulate a Trump solicitation for support. "It's a big country. It looks like he's got a good team put together based on that email I received."

FINANCE CO-CHAIRS TAKE SHAPE

Last week, Trump's S.C. chairman, **Ed McMullen**, said he, former S.C. Ports Authority Chairman **Bill Stern** and S.C. Lt. Gov. **Henry McMaster** - the first statewide elected official in

SEE BUZZ, 6A

eight more years of the policies we've been handed over the last eight years."

● **Bob Royall**: The S.C. commerce secretary under Gov. **David Beasley** and U.S. ambassador to Tanzania under President **George W. Bush** said he is supporting Trump, in part, because he thinks he will "keep us safe."

● **Jim Shore**: A figurine artist from York

● **Van Hipp**: Chairman of American Defense International, author of a book about terrorism, and former S.C. GOP chairman and deputy assistant

secretary of the U.S. Army

● **Alan Clemmons**: A Myrtle Beach real estate attorney and seven-term Republican state representative

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Trump's Carolina fundraiser just can't keep still.

Last week, the campaign announced a Sept. 27 fundraiser south of Charlotte at an undisclosed location. Those plans shifted the event from a S.C.-based event in Charleston to Charlotte, putting it in a battleground state.

However, after protests

over the fatal police shooting of **Keith Scott** rocked downtown Charlotte, McMullen said Friday the campaign is looking for a new Charlotte-area location for a Trump rally and fundraiser in the next two weeks.

"It's just not the right time to be in downtown Charlotte," McMullen said, adding the campaign did not want to further burden law enforcement with the GOP presidential candidate's entourage.

MCGILL: SC SUPPORTS ME FOR GOVERNOR

Yancey McGill is wast-

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ing no time gaining a fundraising edge in his bid to be the 2018 Republican nominee for governor.

The longtime state senator and brief lieutenant governor, who raised \$155,000 in May and June, will hold a fundraiser Oct. 6 in Florence.

According to the invitation, 45 couples and 15 other people are hosting the event – a “who’s who” of Pee Dee politics, according to one GOP operative.

The fundraiser is one of six that McGill has planned, he told The Buzz.

“We’ve been all over the state in all 46 counties, and we’ve realized the support is there to be elected the next governor of South Carolina,” McGill said, adding he is confident he can raise the \$5 million or more that he

foresees spending to be competitive in June’s wide-open GOP primary.

The longtime Democratic state senator from Kingstree temporarily filled a vacancy in the

lieutenant governor’s office when Republican **Glenn McConnell** resigned.

After leaving office, McGill switched to the GOP, saying he had stayed with the Democrats because his district was Democratic even though he sided with Republicans on abortion and spending.

SC’S ‘COST EFFECTIVE’ ROAD SPENDING?

Someone did not get the memo.

Critics of spending more on South Carolina’s roads system say it is not a lack of money, but a lack of effective management behind the state’s subpar roads. But, according to a Reason Foundation report, South Carolina’s roads system ranks first for “cost effectiveness.”

You would think that S.C. roads chief **Christy Hall** would be pleased by that plaudit. She isn’t.

Hall said the state’s road repair agency just maintains roads with less

money – and that is not good news. “(S)pending the least per mile in the nation means that some needs are unmet and deferred maintenance is accumulating rapidly,” Hall said.

Spending little also comes with a cost – in human lives. South Carolina was among the worst four states for road fatality rates, according to the Reason report.

BUZZ BITES

Bucking ETV: S.C. Educational Television’s decision not to televise election debates this fall apparently is unpopular enough that some ETV donors are sending their pledges elsewhere.

Two S.C. residents sent 2nd District Democrat **Arik Bjorn**’s campaign a combined \$290 that they said otherwise would have been donated to ETV, according to letters Bjorn showed The Buzz.

The letter writers said they hope redirecting the

donations sends the network a message. ETV has caught flak since deciding not to show any debates this fall, including a planned 2nd District debate between Bjorn and U.S. Rep. **Joe Wilson**, R-Springdale.

McMaster lends helping hand: S.C. Gov. **Nikki Haley** isn’t the only top S.C. Republican playing kingmaker. Lt. Gov. McMaster is hosting a fundraiser on Oct. 11 at his Columbia home for North Carolina Lt. Gov. **Dan Forest**. The Republican is running for re-election in battleground North Carolina, where the presidential race is tight and other Republicans – including Gov. **Pat McCrory** and U.S. Sen. **Richard Burr** – face tough re-election opposition. McMaster is asking for donations ranging from \$100 to \$5,100.

Reporters Cassie Cope, Bristow Marchant and Avery Wilks contributed.



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Author: BY JAMIESELF jself@thestate.com

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BY JAMIE SELF
 jself@thestate.com

Valerie Williams remembers as a child being distracted by raindrops falling from the ceiling of the classroom in her Denmark elementary school.

Today, more than two decades later, the 1950s-era elementary school still has a leaky roof. Its boiler overheats classrooms in winter. And, in the summer, air-conditioning window units buzz in classrooms while the tar-patched roof melts, sending black tar oozing earthward over the awnings.

“When is it going to change?” said the 36-year-old Williams, whose three daughters – ages 17, 15 and 9 – attend the district’s schools.

Despite promises to improve public education for all students, South Carolina’s GOP-controlled state government has not addressed the disparities between poor school districts – almost all in

sued the state, seeking more money.

● In 2014, the S.C. Supreme Court ruled the way the state’s public schools are funded was unfair and unconstitutional. Two years later, little has changed, rural schools say.

Findings

● Two-plus decades after poor schools sued the state, South Carolina’s spending on education has failed to keep pace with inflation and student growth.

● Two years after the S.C. Supreme Court said the state needs to spend more on its poorest students, legislators have passed only four

SEE SCHOOLS, 10A

● In 1993, three dozen predominantly black, poor rural schools

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reforms in response. Two called for studies. One ordered the state Education Department to do something it already was doing. The fourth requires schools to graduate more capable students but includes no added money.

- While lawmakers tout other reforms – they have passed spending more on students in poverty and paying for technology and reading coaches, for example – their impact has been limited. The added money translated into one reading coach for Bamberg 2's 650 students, for instance, and did nothing to eliminate the disparities in funding from district to district.

- Part of the solution, says South Carolina's schools superintendent, is a new school funding formula. That will mean taking money from more affluent school districts and sharing the added income among all schools from new industries lured to the state by taxpayer-paid incentives.

MORE INSIDE

A by-the-numbers look at how

FROM PAGE 1A

SCHOOLS

black communities and in Democratic areas of the state – and wealthy districts – most in white Republican communities – that have been decades in the making.

- This year, state lawmakers agreed to spend \$430 million more on education than nine years ago, before the Great Recession. But that 18 percent growth – most in this year's budget – is not a windfall of new spending. Instead, state spending is only slightly higher – in inflation-adjusted dollars – than nine years ago. Those dollars go to educate 6 percent more students than before the recession.

- At Gov. Nikki Haley's encouragement, lawmakers have spent more in recent years on reading coaches, technology and students in poverty. But this year, legislators failed to pass Haley's proposal – the first of its kind in nearly two decades – to spend state money to help poor districts build and renovate schools. For decades, districts have had to raise money locally to upgrade facilities – leaving wealthier districts with strong tax bases with a huge advantage in facilities over poorer ones.

- Of four new education laws passed this year, two call for studies and another one calls for the S.C. Department of Educa-

tion to continue an existing program. The fourth new law sets higher achievement standards for students, but does not include any new state money to help them reach those goals.

S.C. Superintendent of Education Molly Spearman said she plans to use the new law – requiring high school graduates to be ready for 21st century jobs or educations – to hold state leaders' "feet to the fire."

"We're breaking the law in South Carolina because we said that every student has to be prepared," she said.

Spearman also says the state's system for funding public education – one that leaves some districts receiving far more money per student – needs an overhaul.

A solution should include sharing taxes raised when the state lures major corporations to the state with tax breaks paid for by all taxpayers, Spearman said. All school districts should benefit, not just the district where the company locates.

"All of South Carolina supports when incentives are given (to new companies), so we've got to look at that," said Spearman, a Republican. "Otherwise, the disparity is going to continue to widen."

Spearman also said rural

the state's school funding system fails its poorest students, **11A**

VIDEO

THESTATE.COM: Students, educators in two rural S.C. school districts talk about the challenges their districts face.

Rebuilding SC

Fifth in a monthly series: A decade after the Great Recession, South Carolina state government is reeling. Dams fail under poor regulation. Social Services caseworkers are overworked and

underpaid, and children die. Roads are crumbling. And poor students are being abandoned. Why? And what can be done?

school districts need to look at consolidating or sharing services.

In an interview Monday with The State newspaper, Haley would not endorse creating a statewide approach to funding schools. Instead, the Lexington Republican said she wants to focus spending on programs that are needed, and work to ensure school districts are spending money wisely and consolidating resources when possible.

Haley also touted recent increases in spending on students in poverty as "one of the best things we could have done" to make school funding more equitable.

Representatives of the districts that sued the state two decades ago say the recent changes, while welcome, barely

scrape the surface of the problem.

The changes in funding amount to a tweak that did nothing to untangle the web of federal, state and local tax dollars that leaves some school districts receiving much more money than others, critics say. The differences in what school districts receive is big – as much as \$18,507 a student in the Fairfield School District and as little as \$7,546 a student in Dillon 3.

Title: **SC IS IGNORING POOR SCHOOLS**
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Meanwhile, the added money for reading coaches and technology in poor school systems – touted by Haley as “transformational” – has been too little, critics say.

Bamberg 2, for example, received enough added money to hire one reading coach for its roughly 650 students – an addition Superintendent Thelma Sojourner said the district appreciates. The district, one of the poor school systems that sued the state, also spent about \$37,000 over two years on technology, including computers and technical assistance for staff, according to a state education oversight agency.

Bolder reforms are in order, advocates of the state’s poor, rural students say.

“Have they (legislators) passed any reforms this year?” Clarendon 2 Superintendent John Tindal asked rhetorically.

“As a member of the plaintiff districts, I would have liked to have seen a more expeditious approach to enacting some things that could help us right away,” said Tindal, adding his district needs help recruiting and retaining teachers.

SLOW START TO REFORMS

Rural S.C. school districts have waited a long time for long-term solutions.

Two years ago, the S.C. Supreme Court issued a sweeping condemnation of the public

school system, ruling it has failed to provide all children with the quality education guaranteed by the state Constitution, especially children in poor, rural districts.

The court ordered state leaders and the school districts to come up with solutions together, setting a deadline for legislation that it later abandoned.

Four new education laws passed the Legislature this year, but they did not go far enough, according to the school districts that sued.

The laws were gleaned from County: Richland

dozens of recommendations that a S.C. House panel of lawmakers, business leaders and school district representatives developed over a year of meetings.

One new law sets higher standards for the skills that every S.C. high school graduate must have to succeed in college, and in technology and manufacturing jobs – positions employers say they are having a hard time filling.

That law, however, does not require lawmakers to give enough money to school districts to ensure they can to meet the new standards, the districts that sued the state have said.

Another new law requires the S.C. Department of Education to start doing something it already was doing before the law was passed – increasing the technical assistance it gives to struggling school districts.

The other two new laws call for studies to identify obsolete education laws and a survey of college students to see what would attract them to teach in rural communities.

The Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention and Advancement at Winthrop University has been surveying school districts for years about why S.C. teachers leave their jobs, the districts that sued the state noted in a memo to the court.

Teachers leave their jobs because of low pay and working conditions, the center’s director, Jane Turner, said.

Another college student survey “can’t hurt,” but funding schools more equitably would help, Turner said.

“I just don’t see how anybody could argue that our funding system isn’t in serious need of review. Just the fact that we have districts out there with crumbling buildings and holes in the ceiling and that kind of thing, obviously something isn’t working.”

REBUILDING S.C. SCHOOLS

The leaders of the S.C. House and Senate wrote to the Supreme Court that the legislation they passed this year and still are weighing builds on three decades of legislative efforts to improve public education.

Since the 1993 lawsuit, the state has adopted a free 4-year-old kindergarten for students in poverty and an education lottery that pays for college scholarships and some K-12 needs.

To give students and families more choices, lawmakers created charter schools and passed a tax credit to help children with disabilities attend private school.

In January, Haley also asked lawmakers to approve borrowing up to \$200 million a year to send to districts to help renovate and build new schools.

The state last chipped in for school facilities in 1999, when Democratic Gov. Jim Hodges and lawmakers agreed to borrow \$750 million for the state’s more than 80 school districts, averaging about \$9 million a district.

Haley’s proposal was vague and did not pass. However, lawmakers have vowed to take it up in January, during the next legislative session. Meanwhile, the state is doing another study, surveying the building needs of districts.

Still up for debate is whether schools will have to repay the money they get for building projects. How much money would be available for districts would depend on how much money lawmakers agree to spend.

Without help from the state, S.C. school districts have tried to pay their own way to better buildings.

Since 1999, voters across the state have approved almost \$7 billion in borrowing to help upgrade school facilities and technology, according to the S.C. School Boards Association.

However, during that same

period, other districts saw nearly \$2 billion in proposals fail at the ballot box.

‘RUNNING ON BORROWED TIME’

In Abbeville, one of the school districts that sued the state, the district’s students generally outperform students in similar districts and statewide.

But facilities have not changed much in years.

“We’re kind of running on borrowed time in our facilities, and I’m worried that we could have something break tomorrow that we wouldn’t be able to fix,” said Superintendent Jonathan Phipps.

With two high schools built in the 1950s, Abbeville School District leaders are studying what it would cost to upgrade air-conditioning, plumbing and electrical systems at those facilities. The costs could reach \$18 million or more, Phipps said.

Getting older buildings up to newer building and safety codes means higher costs, he added.

Phipps said, for example, his district wanted to add a culinary program to its cosmetology and building construction classes – its career courses.

But the kitchen at Dixie High School needed a lot of work.

“The easiest way to say it is that area was condemned,” he said.

Phipps said the district found about \$200,000 to upgrade the kitchen, but the costs to bring it up to code were much higher than they would have been in a newer building.

“It is so unfair that the geographic location of where our kids are determines the facilities they have,” he said.

FUNDING IS KEY, SCHOOLS CHIEF SAYS

To level the playing field for students, the state should adopt a statewide approach to funding public education, S.C. schools chief Spearman said.

But persuading lawmakers to

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do that will be difficult, she said. The idea is not new and will be difficult to pass through the Legislature.

"It's going to require some legislators voting ... against revenue staying in their own communities," said Spearman, a former state representative.

"That's a difficult thing for legislators to do. You try to do what's best for your constituents." But, she added, "you are a legislator for the whole state of South Carolina. We'll see if we can get there."

Rural districts also must be willing to compromise by consolidating operations or sharing resources, she said.

But lawmakers also must commit the money necessary to give all students a chance at success, she said, noting the new state law requiring that every S.C. student graduate ready to succeed in college or a career.

Even as that law passed, the Education Department already was preparing to allow some students to continue taking standardized tests using pencil and paper because those students do not know how to use a computer.

The problem highlights the varying access S.C. students have to technology and computer courses, Spearman said, adding the disparities have "got to change."

STUDENTS SEE THE DISPARITIES

Some S.C. students have noticed their schools have less than others.

Those differences can be huge, a group of Swansea High School students in the Lexington 4 School District learned. The students formed a group, called Student Voice, to raise awareness about inequalities in education across the state.

During a recent visit to the State House, the students received a "canned answer" from

legislators about why some districts have more money than others, said Dawn Sargent, the group's adviser.

"They were told that the reason we cannot do equitable funding across the state is because they have constituents in wealthy school districts ... who would be very angry if we equalized everything across the state," Sargent said.

"I just remember saying, 'Are you kidding? You just told my students that their wealthy constituents ... are more important than students who go to rural school districts.' ... I was angered by that answer."

The Swansea High students say they have a lot of pride in their school. But they wish it had more to offer, such as more than one foreign language: Spanish. High school performances also take place on a small stage in the school's cafeteria as guests watch from round lunchroom tables.

Located about 25 miles from Swansea High, River Bluff High School, also in Lexington County but in the affluent Lexington 1 School District, has a large performing arts center on campus. The high school also offers five foreign languages, including Spanish.

"If the state is going to say ... these are the standards that everybody has to meet, then everybody in the state should have the same opportunities and resources," said Leah Knight, a Swansea junior.

Lexington 4 voters will decide in November whether to approve borrowing \$25 million to build a new performing arts center at Swansea High while also improving career and technology facilities, and some of the school's ball fields and parking areas.

But recruiting and retaining talented teachers is Lexington 4's biggest obstacle, especially when teachers can go to neigh-

boring districts and make more money, Superintendent Linda Lavender said.

The state sets the minimum salaries that districts must pay to teachers, based on their years of experience and education. But some districts choose to pay more – giving them an advantage in recruiting and retaining quality teachers.

The state could help poorer districts compete with wealthier neighbors by focusing resources on the districts that need a boost, Lavender said.

"Being equitable does not mean being equal," she added. "In a rural school district, in order to recruit and retain teachers, you're probably going to have to pay more."

'SHE HAS MISSED OUT'

Williams' daughter Za'Taveya Williams, a senior at Denmark-Olar High School in Bamberg 2, said she began noticing the differences between her school and others while traveling to other schools for sporting events.

"It made me feel like my school was very poor, and we weren't getting the things we should have had like other schools," said the basketball player and cheerleader, who also is on a student committee advising state lawmakers.

Za'Taveya says she wants more opportunities for her younger sisters and other youth in the Bamberg school district.

"I want more for them," she said. "There are more opportunities out there, and I want them to be able to see that for themselves."

Za'Taveya's mother, Valerie, said she is overjoyed with her oldest daughter's academic success. Still, she knows her oldest daughter "has missed out on some things."

When Za'Taveya goes to college next year, "she's going to have to study a bit harder than

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some of the other kids ... just to maintain a great GPA (grade-point average), just to get the experience that she needs for that course and to help her with life," her mother said.

In November, voters in Bamberg 2 will decide the fate of a \$38 million school bond referendum that could improve the schools for Za'Taveya's younger sisters.

The money would build a new school for kindergarten through eighth grade, moving students out of the 1950s-era elementary and middle schools, said Bamberg 2 Superintendent Sojourner while giving reporters a tour of the elementary school.

The playground there was

mostly an open field with one cluster of faded plastic equipment in the corner. Boys played basketball in a gym without air conditioning. The gym's bathrooms lacked dispensers for soap and toilet paper, and ceiling tiles slumped.

While she hopes the borrowing proposal will pass, Sojourner says she has fought the idea that her students – 94 percent living in poverty – cannot learn in the schools that she, too, attended.

Sojourner says she refuses to call her students "at risk" or utter the phrase "Corridor of Shame" – the title of a documentary about the state's poorest, rural schools – now widely used to describe the state's

poorest, rural schools.

"When children get off the bus and come into our buildings, they should have the opportunity to be provided the same education as a child who enters any building in the state of South Carolina," Sojourner said of her district's students, who performed better than students in similar districts on academic tests last year but still lagged behind students statewide.

"Our economic status – that doesn't tell us who we are. We are here to provide an education for our children."

Jamie Self: 803-771-8658,
 @jamiemself

“
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY GERRY MELENDEZ gmelendez@thestate.com

The Bamberg 2 school district is home to some of the oldest inadequate school buildings.
Top photo: Parts of the gymnasium floor at Denmark-Olar Elementary School are buckling.

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Thelma Sojourner, superintendent of Denmark-Olar Schools, talks about some of the problems at the elementary school.



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Repair issues can be found throughout Denmark-Olar schools. Left to right: A broken window in the elementary school's gymnasium; water damage can be seen throughout the elementary school; parts of the gymnasium stands in the middle school need to be replaced; damage to the floor under a drinking fountain at the high school.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY GERRY MELENDEZ gmelendez@thestate.com

As the economy has recovered, legislators have given all K-12 schools more money, but big issues remain unresolved.

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Za'Taveya Williams, a senior at Denmark-Olar High School, said she began noticing the differences between her school and others while traveling to other schools for sporting events.

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Barrel maker opening in Bamberg

ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAMBERG - A new company will soon be rolling out the barrels in Gov. Nikki Haley's hometown.

The governor returned to Bamberg on Wednesday where she helped cut the ribbon at Black Water Barrels LLC.

The new company, which is creating about 60 jobs, will make white oak barrels in which to age bourbon. The company is investing \$3.6 million to start the operation in an old automotive plant.

Black Water President Greg Pierce thanked local officials for the support they have given the endeavor.

Haley said that neighbors helping neighbors is still the old hometown she remembers.