

County gives affordable housing projects boost

HOUSING, from A1

challenges.

Those include plans to turn the former Archer School on the Charleston peninsula into apartments for low-income older residents; the Charleston Housing Authority's redevelopment of an apartment complex on Huger Street; construction of the Esau Jenkins Village apartments for low-income seniors on Johns Island; and nonprofit One80 Place's development of a 70-apartment building for residents who have experienced homelessness.

In 2019, financing for One80 Place's seven-story building on Meeting Street on the Charleston peninsula seemed to have fallen into place when the city contributed millions that were needed. But by 2022, the project's price tag had grown from \$24 million to \$31.7 million.

"The county stepping in with the ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funding is huge," said One80 Place Executive Director Stacey Denaux.

"While it doesn't get the project across the finish line, it really helps."

Charleston County is contributing \$2 million to that development. When complete, the One80 Place building will offer apartments for people with very low incomes who have experienced homelessness, plus support services and rooms to temporarily shelter homeless women and families.

Denaux said permits are in hand for the project, but a state decision about several million dollars in financing has not been made. At issue is about \$3 million in state tax-exempt bonds that the nonprofit needs in order to access federal tax credits that were previously approved.

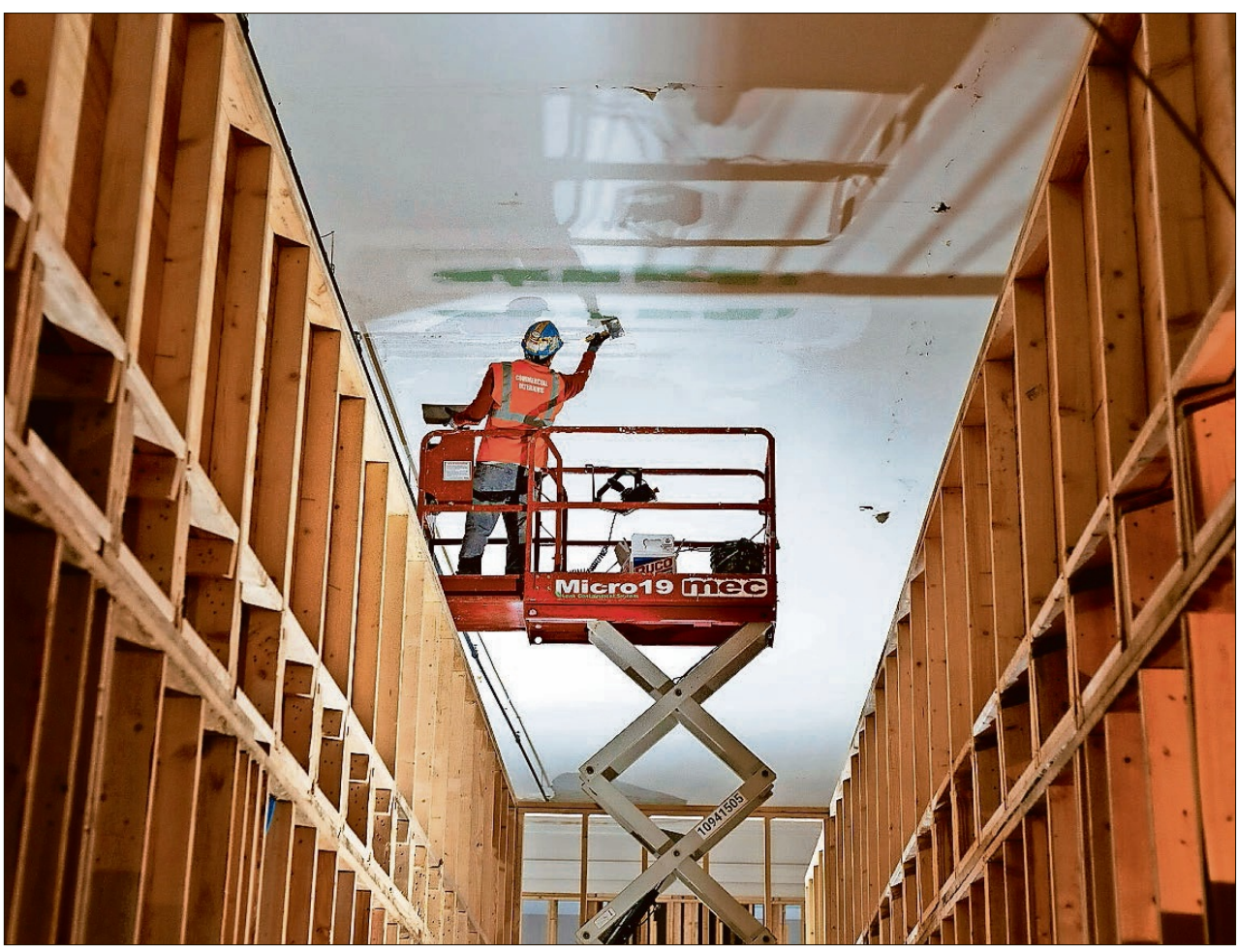
"With all these (financing) delays, the project costs have gone up, because of interest rates and rising costs," Denaux said.

Charleston County's decision to spend \$11.5 million on "gap financing" out of nearly \$30 million in federal funds County Council dedicated to housing was seen as an opportunity to get local developments finished. The county has awarded \$10.2 million in grants so far.

The Charleston Housing Authority's plan to replace a 12-apartment low-income housing complex on Huger Street with 77 apartments for people with a wider range of incomes is one beneficiary.

The authority was counting on state tax credits to partially finance the nearly \$30 million development. Charleston County is providing \$1.75 million to help.

"The thing is, we had this whole hullabaloo with tax credits," said Charleston Housing Authority CEO Art



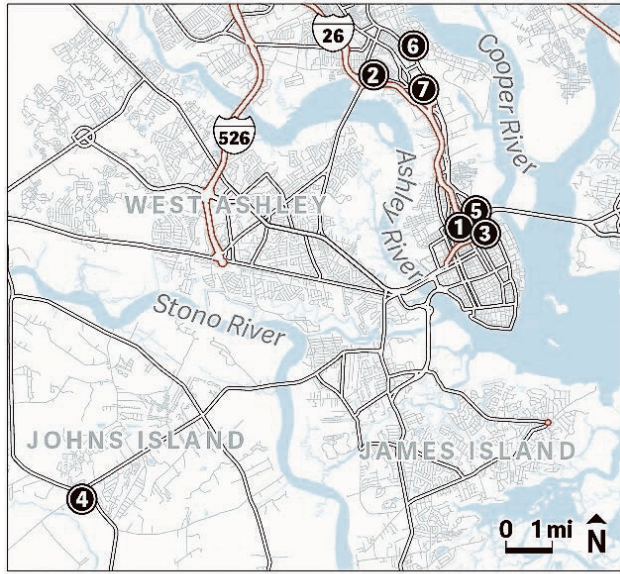
GRACE BEAHM ALFORD/STAFF

Framing for apartments flanks what is now a hallway where ceiling plasterwork is being repaired in the former auditorium by crews from Commercial Interiors at the Archer School in Charleston on March 10. The school is being transformed into apartments for low-income older residents.

Affordable housing developments

Charleston County is spending \$10.2 million in federal funds to support affordable housing efforts by nonprofit groups that are expected to create 308 apartments and 32 new homes.

1. 573 Meeting St. (70 apartments)
2. North Bridge Towns (20 townhomes)
3. Archer School apartments (89 apartments)
4. Esau Jenkins Village (72 apartments)
5. 275 Huger St. (77 apartments)
6. 1900 block of Token Street (six homes)
7. Six homes in southern North Charleston



SOURCE: ESRI BRANDON LOCKETT/STAFF

Milligan. "All of a sudden everybody and their brother was coming to South Carolina to do tax-credit projects because you could get state and federal tax credits."

South Carolina expanded tax-credit financing for affordable housing developments in 2020 with the Workforce and Senior Affordable Housing Act, spurring plans for an estimated 4,000 homes. But in May the state cut that

funding back sharply after realizing the long-term cost of the tax credit initiative could be in the billions, far above initial estimates.

"There are a lot of projects that were cut after the fact, after the start of construction," said Humanities Foundation Executive Director Tracy Doran.

Humanities Foundation will get \$2 million from the county for its project, which

is under construction, to turn the former Archer School into apartments for low-income older residents.

"This money goes a long way," she said.

The \$42 million project should be finished near the end of 2024, Doran said.

Another plan that had been tax-credit approved but wound up with financing problems was the 72-apartment Esau Jenkins Village project being developed by Sea Island Comprehensive Health Care Corp.

"That's why we're in this problem, the cap on state tax credits," said Leon Burton, CEO of the Johns Island nonprofit group.

Like the One80 Place and Archer School developments, Esau Jenkins Village will get \$2 million from the county.

"It definitely helped us with the problem," Burton said. "We're much closer to fully funded" than where we were.

The county is also helping to fund two plans that will each build a half-dozen homes in North Charleston.

The nonprofit group Metanoia will receive \$390,000 from the county for its plan to build six houses on Token Street, in the south end of North Charleston on land Metanoia acquired in recent years.

The three-bedroom, 1,200-square-foot homes will cost an estimated \$330,000 to build and will be sold for an estimated \$180,000 to buyers who earn no more than 80 percent of the area's median

income, which works out to \$61,700 for a two-person household.

The Rev. Bill Stanfield, who leads Metanoia, said that without the county funding "we would be building units on Token Street, but we would probably have to cut the project in half."

The county gap financing is among at least seven public and private funding sources for that six-house project.

"We call it financing lasagna; there are many layers," Stanfield said.

Community First Land Trust is also building a half-dozen houses in North Charleston, and will receive \$600,000 from the county. Two of the homes are already under construction.

The trust's model is to maintain ownership of the land, then sell the homes and lease the land they sit upon to income-qualified buyers, which reduces the price since the land isn't being sold.

The trust can also set resale prices for those houses, according to its application for county funding, so that they will be affordable for future buyers while still allowing for financial gains for the sellers.

The largest homeownership effort to receive gap financing from the county is nonprofit Bridge North Charleston's development, a plan to build 20 townhouses at 5312 Meridian Road, then sell them below market prices to buyers with low to moderate incomes.

"There's obviously an af-

fordability gap, which we are trying to close," said Will Jenkinson, a board member of the nonprofit.

"The hope is, by this time next year we'll have 20 families moved in."

The county's \$1.5 million will allow the development called North Bridge Towns to sell the townhouses for less than it cost to build them.

Five would be sold to people with incomes no higher than 80 percent of the area median income, 10 to people in the 81-100 percent AMI income range, and the remaining five to people with incomes in the 101-120 percent AMI range.

Area median income is the midpoint for household incomes, and depends on how many people are in the household. So, a family with income greater than the AMI earns more than at least half the households in the area with the same family size.

"Our hope and plan is to not just build these 20 townhomes" in North Charleston, Jenkinson said. The nonprofit also wants to work on education, employment and food security issues in the Accabee community where the site is located, he said.

The North Bridge Towns project is in many ways similar to the Bermuda Point Towns development in West Ashley, which received \$1.5 million from the Charleston Redevelopment Corp. and will offer 30 of its 40 townhouses at below-market rates.

The county's \$11.5 million gap financing effort is the largest use of nearly \$30 million County Council dedicated to housing from federal ARPA funds.

Other uses include \$3 million for a home repair program for the elderly, \$2.5 million to buy 18 vacant houses from the county housing authority, \$3 million for staffing and program management, and \$1.1 million for a women and children's shelter.

With a bit less than \$9 million remaining from that pool of ARPA money, the county is now reviewing feedback collected at a series of public meetings about the county's 131-page "Housing our Future" plan.

"The county will be most effective in its efforts to increase the production of affordable housing if it has an ongoing funding source for gap financing programs in place by the end of 2024," the plan says.

So far, no such funding source has been created for gap financing or most of the other initiatives, such as creating a housing trust fund, that are outlined in the plan.

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Task force urges pay hike as recruiting teachers gets tougher

SALARY, from A1

The task force presentation was the culmination of a compensation review that began in August. Chief Human Resources Officer Bill Briggman created the group, which is made up of two dozen former and current educators and other district staff. The group was charged with studying the pay issue after the Charleston County School District found itself with record vacancies.

In his two decades recruiting teachers to work in Charleston County, Briggman said it's never been more difficult to attract good candidates.

"I've never seen the landscape like I see now," Briggman told the school board.

Teacher recruitment and retention issues are not unique to Charleston County or the Lowcountry. All told, there were 1,474 vacant positions across South Carolina when the school year started, according to the Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention and Advancement.

It was a nearly 40 percent jump from a year earlier and

About the project

The Post and Courier Education Lab is a multi-year project, employing four reporters, focused on the need for public education reform in South Carolina. The Coastal Community Foundation and Spartanburg Foundation serve as fiscal administrators for the Education Lab, which is supported by grants from the Jolley Foundation, Intertech, and anonymous donations on behalf of donors to The Post and Courier Public Service and Investigative Fund who designate to the Education Lab.

the most vacancies recorded since CERRA began tracking the trend in 2001.

While the struggle to get and keep teachers isn't unique, Charleston County's high costs of living makes the issue of low pay particularly acute. Housing costs here have skyrocketed more than anywhere else in the state,

More coverage

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putting the costs of renting — let alone homeownership — beyond the means of many teachers.

Most new and veteran teachers are considered "cost-burdened," meaning they spend more than 30 percent of their gross pay on housing. It would take a starting pay of \$77,880 to relieve that pressure for new teachers, the task force said. It would take an annual salary of \$128,360 to buy the average Charleston County home, it said.

The task force told the board that even if a first-year teacher with a bachelor's degree lived with a roommate, their base expenses for housing, utilities, groceries and a car add up to \$155 more per month than they earn.

A more veteran teacher with a master's degree could technically cover the costs of a one-bedroom apartment (they'd



FILE/GAVIN MCINTYRE/STAFF

After studying teacher pay for months, a Charleston County School District task force has recommended the district increase starting teacher pay by about \$15,000.

have \$118 left over after those base expenses), but they would need to make \$1,164 more to be able to afford the average cost of a home mortgage in the Charleston area.

In all of the teacher budget scenarios, there's little to nothing left for any kind of discretionary or emergency expenses, the group said.

The task force presentation brought many teachers to the meeting. They pleaded with the board for higher pay. Several described living paycheck to paycheck. One said she lives

with her mom to make ends meet.

Others told how they have abandoned dreams of owning a home or having children. Any unexpected expense can derail them — one teacher said it took him two years to pay off medical bills after he had appendicitis.

"This is not about paying teachers what they deserve," said Jody Stallings, a veteran teacher with 31 years of experience who served on the task force. "This is about paying teachers what they

need to survive."

In addition to increasing starting pay and bumping subsequent steps on the teacher pay scale in accordance with that, the task force recommended expanding the pay scale itself. It currently tops out at 30 years of experience, even though there are about 300 teachers in the district with more years in the classroom, Briggman said.

The group recommended immediately adding five years to the scale to give a pay boost to those experienced teachers. They also recommend the district expand the number of steps to 40 next year.

Board members asked Superintendent Don Kennedy to come to their next meeting with an estimate of costs if the board was to adopt the immediate recommendation to expand the pay scale.

As for the other recommendations, the board said it needs more information first. The pay discussion is likely to dominate conversations over the next few months as the board develops the district's 2023-24 budget.

HOUSING



In the space formerly occupied by the school-front office, Ezequiel Torres (left) and Johnny Bunao (right) with Trident Construction discuss the status of the plumbing as construction continues at the Archer School to create apartments for low-income older residents in Charleston on March 10.

Affordable housing efforts get \$10.2M to overcome hurdles

Charleston County using federal funds as state cuts back

BY DAVID SLADE
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State cutbacks in affordable housing financing that coincided with rising construction costs threatened a number of developments, but Charleston County is using millions of federal dollars to close some of those gaps.

Together, developments receiving recently approved county support are expected to create 308 apartments and 32 new homes that will be sold at below-market prices.

Elderly residents with low incomes, potential buyers who've struggled to find houses they can afford, and low-wage workers with a history of homelessness all stand to benefit.



Charleston County provided \$1.5 million in federal funds to the North Bridge Towns development in North Charleston, where a nonprofit plans to build 20 townhomes and sell them at below-market prices.

Some developments are still hanging on state decisions about missing pieces of their financing, so gaps do remain.

Four of the five largest developments the county is assisting financially were previously announced but had run into funding

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EDUCATION

Task force urges \$15K teacher pay increase

Calls for \$58K starting salary, with trustees saying that's still low

BY SARA GREGORY
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The task force looking at pay for Charleston County teachers has recommended increasing starting salaries by nearly \$15,000 — a significant jump, but one both the working group and school board members say only scratches the surface of what's needed.

Currently, the district pays first-year teachers with a bachelor's degree \$43,146, which is above the statewide minimum of \$40,000. The pay scale increases with additional years of experience or for teachers with advanced degrees.

The task force proposes a starting salary of \$58,000, which it presented along with other recommendations at the board's March 13 meeting.

That is the "bare minimum" of what the district should aim to pay, said District 2 board member Ed Kelley.

"I would personally say \$58,000 is insultingly low," he said.

As of now, there's no plan for how to implement the recommended increase, let alone one that goes beyond. The district considered a \$4,000 increase last year but couldn't find the money to afford that, opting for \$2,000 instead.

"I hate that we're in the situation we're in," said Courtney Waters, who represents District 4.

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ENVIRONMENT

EPA targets 'forever chemicals' in water

Proposal aims to keep drinking supplies safe

BY MICHAEL PHILLIS
and MATTHEW DALY
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Environmental Protection Agency on Tuesday proposed the first federal limits on harmful "forever chemicals" in drinking water, a long-awaited protection the agency said will save thousands of lives and prevent serious illnesses, including cancer.

The plan would limit toxic PFAS chemicals to the lowest level that tests can detect. PFAS, or per- and polyfluorinated substances, are a group of compounds that are widespread, dangerous and expensive to remove from water. They don't degrade in the environment and

Please see **PFAS**, Page A8

DEVELOPMENT

Developer drops permit effort in battle over resort

Bay Point Island is an important habitat for sea turtles and shorebirds. A developer dropped an appeal last month of a circuit court's decision to uphold the denial of a special permit to build on the island.

MILES SANDERS/PROVIDED



Had pursued ecotourism project on Bay Point Island

BY SHAMIRA MCCRAY
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BEAUFORT COUNTY — A developer has dropped an effort to obtain a permit to build a luxury resort on the barrier Bay Point Island.

Talks of the 50-unit resort date back

to 2016. It has faced opposition since then from environmentalists, locals and government officials who acknowledge the island is a highly erosional natural preserve.

Bay Point Island LLC and opposing parties last month agreed to dismiss the appeal of a denied permit that would have sought ecotourism-related housing and dining facilities, plus

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Inside

OPINION

Cooperation between local governments is needed to help to protect the upper Ashley River and the special areas around it. That includes coalescing around a shared vision where development pressures are sure to increase. See **Page A10**



NATION

Biden issues order to strengthen gun checks. **A9**

WORLD

US: Russia warplane hits American drone. **A16**

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