SKYLAR LAIRD/STAFF

Rep. Lee Hewitt

Let's advocate for a new vision for Georgetown's waterfront area

BY LEE HEWITT

As the state representative whose district encompasses Georgetown, I have always believed that our communities deserve a future defined not just by what has come before, but by what we can create together. The recent discussions about the future of the closed International Paper mill and the nearby Liberty Steel site open the door to a bold new vision for Georgetown's waterfront — one that balances economic growth, environmental responsibility and community well-being.

The proposed biomass power plant at the International Paper site undoubtedly sparks a conversation about our economic landscape. While many may see potential in a biomass facility to replace some lost jobs and generate economic activity, I urge us to pause and consider the broader implications for Georgetown. The allure of another heavy industrial plant must not cloud our judgment about the kind of community we have the opportunity to create in the wake of the paper plant's closure.

Georgetown is blessed with a beautiful waterfront that holds tremendous potential for more than just industrial development. We are positioned to become a hub for ecotourism and smart growth, where families can enjoy a vibrant cultural scene, recreational opportunities and local businesses flourish. This vision invites us to redefine our relationship with the waterfront — not as a site only for heavy industry, but as a destination marked by opportunities for sportsmen, shoppers, diners and those who need access to affordable housing to remain in our community.

There is an opportunity here — one that includes stakeholders who are not only focused on short-term gains but want to create sustainable economic development, keep blue-collar jobs in Georgetown, and be responsible stewards of our environment. As we consider the future of the International Paper site, we

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must engage with local leaders, the families impacted by the mill's closure, and residents across Georgetown to explore other visions for development, including innovative economic solutions that prioritize the preservation of our coastal environment.

Furthermore, our focus should also extend to the Liberty Steel property. The potential for waterfront redevelopment here is immense, and we should envision a blend of residential, commercial and recreational spaces that celebrate our unique history and natural resources. Our waterfront should become not just a place of work, but a gathering space that strengthens our community bonds and attracts visitors, thus enhancing our local economy.

We have a choice to make — one that will shape the future of Georgetown for generations to come. This is not just about land use; it is about the type of community we want for our children and their children. I invite you to participate in this important discussion as we work together to create a Georgetown that honors its past and creates a sustainable, inclusive and prosperous future.

Let's come together to advocate for a waterfront that reflects our values — one where new ideas and community guide our path forward. The choices we make now will not only define the horizon of our local economy but will also create the landscape of our community's heart and soul.

Lee Hewitt represents S.C. House District 108, encompassing Georgetown and Charleston counties.

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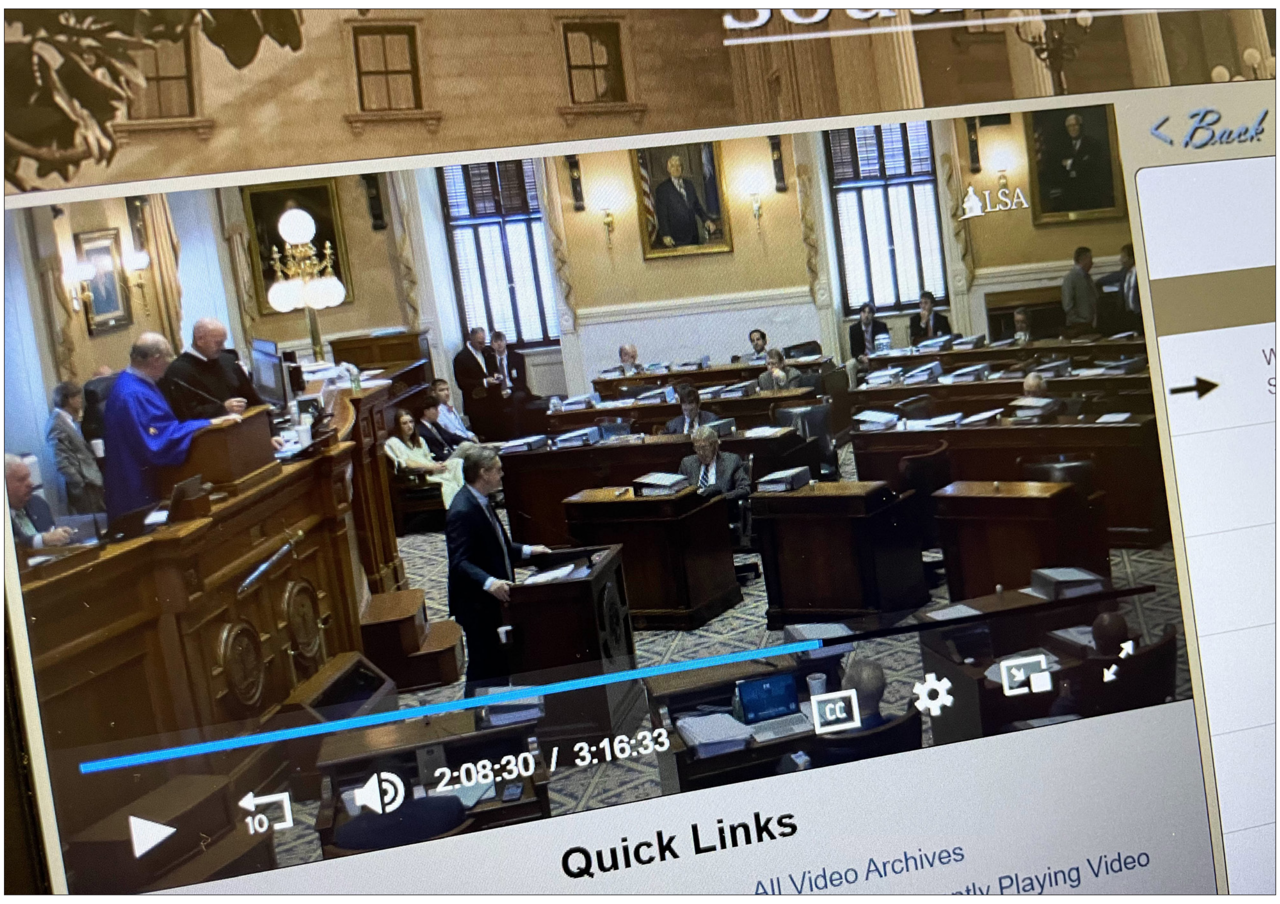


CINDI ROSS SCOPPE/STAFF

The S.C. Senate voted Wednesday to send the long-awaited consolidation of three overlapping health agencies to the governor.

A new day for health care in SC

For years we've heard maddening stories about vulnerable South Carolinians being overlooked, undertreated and even abused by caregivers paid with our tax dollars.

The Department of Disabilities and Special Needs was the latest and most egregious: Its completely dysfunctional part-time governing board looked the other way while abuses mounted, staged amateur spy games to run off competent directors, lobbied to get special treatment for its own members and their relatives and abused our open-government law so blatantly as to make a great comedy routine, if it weren't real.

Even absent the abuses, our disjointed collection of autonomous medical fiefdoms forced poor people seeking routine health care and anybody with disabilities and mental health and substance abuse problems to navigate a confusing maze of alphabet soup health services agencies: DDSN, DAODAS, DMH, DHEC, HHS and a few other stragglers scattered throughout the government. They were shuttled back and forth between the agencies, a process that wasted their time and our money and extended their suffering, as agencies sought to push the problem on to another department.

The system — or more accurately the lack of a system — always looked bad on paper, and in 2023 an exhaustive outside study concluded that we had the most disjointed approach to public health in the nation. Remarkably, the Senate set about trying to right that, with an ambitious plan to abolish the autonomous governing boards and consolidate six health agencies into one, controlled by the governor. After fits and starts, the House approved a nearly identical plan. And many know what happened next: With just minutes left before the 2024 legislative session expired, a band of House misfits trafficking in innuendo and fabricated claims used a procedural delay maneuver to kill the legislation.

Gov. Henry McMaster had been a cheerleader for the megamerger, but he fell back this year and asked only that lawmakers dismantle the part-time boards overseeing Disabilities and Special Needs and the Department of Mental Health and add those agencies to his Cabinet.

Fortunately, the Senate's leaders — Finance Chairman Harvey Peeler and President Tom Alexander along with Labor, Commerce and Industry Chairman Tom Davis — weren't willing to settle for so little. They did scale back, but in addition to abolishing both of those boards and putting the agencies directly under the governor's control, they merged them with the Department of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Services to form a new Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities.

The Senate passed the bill in March, the House quietly passed it earlier this month, and on Wednesday, after a five-minute overview and with no questions, the Senate voted 40-2 to send the bill to Mr. McMaster's desk. We eagerly await his signature.

That still leaves separate departments of Public Health (already split from Environmental Services in 2023), Health and Human Services and Aging, but it combines the three agencies with the most functional overlap, eliminates two of the state's most problematic autonomous governing boards and in so doing makes those former commission-run agencies accountable for their actions for the first time ever. That's a huge improvement that looks modest only when compared to last year's plan.

S.2 also represents the largest reform of South Carolina's duplicative and labyrinthine governmental structure in a quarter century, which means it's time for advocates of efficiency and accountability to start looking for the next area for reform. And it puts a sharper focus on the sore thumbs in the health field — particularly the tiny Department of Aging — that still need to be swept into a larger agency to make it easier for governors to exercise effective control of the executive branch of government.

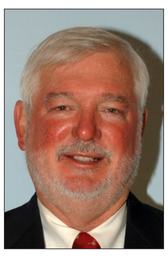
State needs meaningful tax reform

BY WALTER CARR

CINDI ROSS SCOPPE/STAFF

South Carolina's Republican leaders and their supporters gathered last month inside the Statehouse to announce a plan, since put on hold, to make sweeping changes to the state income tax system.

Our General Assembly is debating various changes to our state's income tax system. Meaningful changes are required if our state is to remain competitive with other Southeastern states. Neighboring Georgia and North Carolina are much more income taxpayer-friendly while Florida and Tennessee do not burden their citizens with income taxes. Mississippi and Kentucky are headed in that direction.



Carr

In 2022, South Carolina made some reforms to its income tax system when it reduced its six brackets to three and set in motion the reduction of the 7% bracket to 6% over a number of years. The top bracket rate for 2025 is 6.2% on net taxable income of $17,330 or more for a married couple filing jointly. That is progress. However — and this is a big however — it is not nearly as meaningful as getting real about the impact of inflation on those tables since 1959 when they were established.

The top 1959 7% bracket was reached at $10,000, and if we adjust for inflation using the Consumer Price Inflation calculator, we discover that in 2024 dollars it wouldn't be reached until taxable income hit $107,719. If we make the same calculation for the 1959 6% bracket, it would require an income of $86,175 to reach that bracket. Without getting too deep in the weeds, we now know that taxpayers ought not reach the present 6.2% bracket until their taxable income is around $90,000. Making it so would actually be meaningful reform, while reducing the rate by 0.1% and keeping the threshold at $17,330 is not meaningful. A proper inflation adjustment is required.

Doing so would reduce income tax revenue, but that lost revenue could easily be made up through other much-needed reforms. For example, South Carolina is among the most crony capitalist states in the nation. Millions and even billions of dollars are lavished on big and mega businesses seeking to set up shop in South Carolina — deals that are typically unavailable to small, medium and even most large businesses, and it is those smaller business that end up picking up most of the tab for those lavish subsidies. South Carolina needs to exit the business of crony capitalism.

Another reform that wouldn't affect taxes but would allow lawmakers to better spend our taxes would be to permanently eliminate budget earmarks. They essentially are a means for members of the General Assembly to access and use state tax money as a slush fund for pet projects or organizations in their districts. Why should Lowcountry taxpayers fund a festival in the Upstate, and Upstate taxpayers do likewise for a Lowcountry festival? They shouldn't. Unfortunately for taxpayers, the list of inappropriate and sometimes nonsensical earmarks would likely fill the rest of this page.

The General Assembly needs to get serious and enact meaningful tax and other policy reforms now.

Walter Carr a real estate broker and owner of Carr Properties in Charleston.