

**MINUTES
BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING
UPPER SAVANNAH COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION
430 HELIX ROAD
GREENWOOD, SOUTH CAROLINA
APRIL 27, 2026**

MEMBERS PRESENT: Matthew Brownlee, John Calhoun, Jim Coleman, Frank Daniel, Ken Durham, Qwen Etheredge, Charles Goodwin, Otis Grier Jr., Charlie Henry, Tiffani Ireland, Charles Jennings, Justin Lane, Miliken Matthews, Marian Miller, Sen. Floyd Nicholson, Willie Norman, Dayne Pruitt, David Sawyer, Brandon Smith, Roy Smith Jr., Albert Talbert, Faye Thomas, and Anita Williams.

MEMBERS ABSENT: Johanna Bishop, Jackie Brown, Jeffrey Carroll, Shirley Jenkins, Theo Lane, Sen. Shane Massey, Wes McAllister, Matthew Miller, Ernie Segars, Don Smoak, and Sen. Danny Verdin.

STAFF PRESENT: Patricia Hartung, Sam Leaman, Rick Green, Keith Smith, Peggy Merritt, Kal Kunkel, Langley Richardson, and David Hays.

GUESTS PRESENT: David Kack and Rebecca Gleason, Western Transportation Institute, Montana State University; Susan Jackson, Office of U.S. Rep. Sheri Biggs; Ryan Syrbe, Office of U.S. Senator Tim Scott; Richard Caplan, Town of Saluda Administrator; Scott Neely, Dominion Energy; Myranda Butler, Saluda Town Council

Call to Order	<p>The meeting was held in person with the option to attend via Zoom. Willie Norman gave the invocation and Chairman Charles Jennings called the meeting to order. The minutes from the February 23, 2026, meeting were approved unanimously upon motion by Jim Coleman and properly seconded.</p> <p>Jennings introduced Greenwood County Board member Dayne Pruitt, who was able to attend the meeting for the first time. Floyd Nicholson asked the Board to pray for Pruitt's family due to his wife's health challenges. Guests were welcomed, including new Saluda Town Administrator Richard Caplan.</p>
Guest Presentation: Western Transportation Institute at Montana State University update on public transit feasibility study for Abbeville, Laurens and Saluda counties	<p>Rebecca Gleason and David Kack from the Western Transportation Institute (WTI) at Montana State University provided an update on the public transportation feasibility study for Abbeville, Laurens and Saluda counties via Zoom. The study has been completed and a draft is posted on the Upper Savannah COG website.</p> <p>Gleason thanked USCÓG for initiating the regional public transportation feasibility study through funding provided by the National Association of Development Organizations.</p> <p>Gleason explained that WTI's work has focused on developing transportation and mobility options for Abbeville, Laurens and Saluda counties, the three counties in the Upper Savannah Region currently without public transportation. She said the study intentionally used a broad mobility framework rather than focusing solely on traditional fixed-route transit, examining how transportation affects diverse populations including workers, students, seniors, youth, people with disabilities, and residents without driver's</p>

licenses or reliable vehicle access. The study evaluated numerous transportation approaches including ridesharing, bus transit, volunteer drivers, microtransit, and other flexible transportation solutions designed to connect residents with employment, education, healthcare, groceries and social services.

Gleason said the study did not begin from scratch but was built upon previous transportation studies completed in 2010 and 2014 that had already established transportation needs in the Region. However, WTI sought updated local input to determine current needs and perceptions. Working with USCOG Government Services Director Rick Green and a regional advisory committee, WTI conducted extensive stakeholder outreach across the three counties through interviews, meetings and community sessions. Gleason said Abbeville County generated the highest level of engagement, including meetings with Piedmont Technical College and Be Well Abbeville. Stakeholders for the three counties also included Upper Savannah Area Agency on Aging, S.C. Department of Public Health, McCormick Area Transit, Peach Blossom Express, and other regional organizations serving residents across county lines.

Gleason said the study found transportation barriers significantly impact residents' ability to access employment, medical appointments, groceries, education, internships and social opportunities. Shift workers and younger residents were especially affected. WTI also found that perceptions of transit itself remain a challenge, with many residents and stakeholders viewing public transportation as unavailable, inconvenient, intended only for low-income individuals, or financially unsustainable due to previous transit system attempts.

Gleason said one of the strongest regional assets identified was community collaboration. Across all three counties, residents shared examples of overcoming challenges through local partnerships such as faith-based service networks in Abbeville, countywide initiatives in Laurens, and coordinated disaster response during Hurricane Helene in Saluda.

County-by-county findings showed important distinctions. In Abbeville County, transportation was strongly linked to economic development, with employers expressing concern that lack of mobility limits hiring potential. Gleason said many Abbeville stakeholders expressed enthusiasm for on-demand microtransit models after observing systems in Wilson, N.C. In Laurens County, transportation was more likely to gain broad public support when positioned around workforce development, tourism and downtown vitality, though jurisdictional boundaries were viewed as barriers to regional coordination. In Saluda County, stakeholders recognized transportation needs and believed future systems would face little resistance.

Gleason said that public transportation should be framed as an enabler of economic resilience, health access and quality of life rather than solely as a social service. She said trusted institutions such as employers, schools, healthcare providers and faith communities will be critical in building public support. WTI also recommended prioritizing flexible and convenient service models, especially microtransit and pilot programs that can demonstrate value before broader expansion.

David Kack expanded on the report's mobility framework, explaining that public transportation should not be viewed only as fixed-route buses. He said WTI's central

	<p>philosophy is that there is “not a silver bullet, but silver buckshot,” meaning no single transportation solution will meet the Region’s needs. Instead, multiple integrated mobility options are necessary. Kack highlighted carpooling and employer-supported vanpooling as especially promising due to the presence of major employers across all three counties. He also discussed volunteer driver programs as a potentially cost-effective option because driver wages are often the largest expense in transit systems. Volunteer programs could use either personal vehicles or agency-owned vehicles.</p> <p>Kack said microtransit systems, which use app-based scheduling technology similar to Uber or Lyft but in public transit settings, appear particularly promising for rural areas. He also discussed the need for longer-distance transportation options for specialized healthcare and regional access, where traditional transit, volunteer systems or voucher-based reimbursement for family or friends may be useful. Additionally, Kack stressed that transportation planning should integrate walking and biking infrastructure so that multiple transportation modes work together effectively.</p> <p>WTI’s recommendations include short-term efforts such as continued stakeholder engagement, studying successful systems in Greenville and Columbia, launching carpools, vanpools and volunteer driver programs, and building regional partnerships. Mid-term recommendations included working with SCDOT to secure support for demonstration projects, exploring the hiring of a mobility manager, and implementing pilot projects lasting at least two to three years to allow time for learning, adaptation and long-term sustainability planning.</p> <p>Long-term strategies emphasized building multiple transportation layers over time rather than relying on a single transit system. Kack said that while planning is critical, implementation is essential. He said WTI hopes the report will serve not as a shelf document, but as a practical stepping stone toward real mobility solutions for the three counties.</p>
<p>Staff Reports: Section 5310 Public Transit Application Authorization</p>	<p>Government Services Director Rick Green reminded Board members that the draft transportation feasibility plan for Abbeville, Laurens and Saluda counties is included in Board packets and available online. He said paper copies are also available and noted his intention to continue presenting the findings to county councils and local stakeholders to build awareness and support.</p> <p>Green presented the annual Section 5310 grant application review from the SCDOT Office of Public Transit. This year, Burton Center and Piedmont Agency on Aging were the only applications received, both requesting funding for van purchases. Because Burton Center’s application was determined to be slightly more complete, USCOG recommended Burton Center as first priority and Piedmont Agency on Aging as second priority. Albert Talbert made the motion to approve the rankings, seconded by Willie Norman.</p> <p>Green also reviewed updated regional intersection improvement priorities, explaining that projects already under construction were removed from the list while other projects were advanced for long-range planning review.</p> <p>Brandon Smith, who is Mayor of Greenwood, discussed a recent meeting which USCOG organized with SCDOT and Greenwood officials regarding Greenwood’s</p>

	<p>future transportation and traffic needs. He said Greenwood County representatives emphasized downtown traffic management, bypass utilization for truck traffic, roundabout considerations, and preserving pedestrian safety while accommodating growth. Green also discussed future connectivity between Main Street and the Greenwood Genetics Center campus, including a possible extension of Carolina Avenue toward the campus.</p> <p>Board discussion also included concerns about SCDOT modernization legislation currently under consideration in Columbia. Executive Director Patricia Hartung stressed the importance of preserving the Council of Governments' local role in transportation planning.</p> <p>Anita Williams raised concerns regarding inaccurate accident reporting on a Carolina Avenue intersection in the City of Clinton, citing five accidents that she is aware of which were not reflected in official reports. Green clarified that if local law enforcement does not properly submit accident reports, SCDOT would not be aware of those incidents. Miliken Matthews noted similar reporting issues in Town of Saluda, saying that accidents can be reported retroactively.</p>
<p>Upper Savannah Area Agency on Aging Update</p>	<p>Director of Aging Programs Peggy Merritt gave report on improved numbers within the Aging program, highlighting increases in outreach, assessments, Medicare counseling, and ombudsman advocacy throughout the Region.</p> <p>Merritt said Community Resource Specialist Shannon Hill, who was hired July 1 from another position in the office, serves as the primary point of contact for seniors seeking assistance. She has already logged 2,308 contacts this fiscal year, a substantial increase over the previous full fiscal year total of 1,796.</p> <p>Merritt said Aging staff has completed 153 community outreach events this year to promote available services and connect older adults with resources. She recognized the work of Shannon Hill, Family Caregiver Advocate Aeriell Bowick, State Health Insurance Plan (SHIP) Coordinator Christy Stroud, and Volunteer Ombudsman Coordinator Ashley Capps as key contributors to these outreach efforts. Merritt encouraged Board members and local organizations to contact Stroud at 864 941-8093 for outreach presentations.</p> <p>Merritt said Stroud has already made 3,330 Medicare-related contacts this year, significantly exceeding last year's full-year total of 2,026. Stroud also works extensively with low-income Medicare beneficiaries through the Medicare Improvement for Patients and Providers Act (MIPPA), counseling 457 seniors and submitting 29 applications to help qualified individuals pay Medicare premiums and reduce healthcare costs. Merritt praised Stroud's growing reputation as a trusted resource, noting her presentations often include valuable scam awareness and fraud prevention education in addition to Medicare counseling.</p> <p>Turning to in-home assessments, Merritt explained that assessments are a requirement for nearly all Aging services, as they are necessary to initiate services, maintain eligibility, and keep clients on waiting lists active. The Region's goal is approximately 160 assessments per month. Merritt said this benchmark had not been consistently met for several years due to staffing shortages and operational challenges. However, after adding</p>

a new assessor and implementing best practices under the leadership of Assessment Coordinator Tonya Mann, the team dramatically improved performance. Following collaboration and training with the Appalachian Area Agency on Aging, the Upper Savannah assessment team completed 185 assessments in February and 178 in March, surpassing monthly targets for two consecutive months. Merritt recognized full-time assessors Christine Pyles and Kensley Smart, along with part-time assessor and Home Care program coordinator Latoya Wright for these accomplishments.

Merritt then highlighted Family Caregiver Program developments, with Bowick organizing two upcoming regional caregiver events scheduled for May 19 at St. Paul United Methodist Church in Saluda and June 16 at the Mims Center in McCormick. These events will include lunch, educational speakers, vendor participation, prizes and senior emergency preparedness kits provided in partnership with the Department on Aging. Merritt said the kits will include emergency food, potable water, blankets and other essential resources for older adults. She also credited Regional Aging Advisory Committee member Myranda Butler for her assistance in planning.

The Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program also showed major growth. Merritt reported that Governor Henry McMaster proclaimed April 20, 2026, as Long-Term Care Ombudsman Volunteer Appreciation Day. Upper Savannah marked the occasion with a recognition event led by Capps and Regional Ombudsman Ericca Livingston. Merritt noted that during the first six months of the federal fiscal year, ombudsman staff opened 49 cases, already exceeding the prior year's total. These cases involve residents in nursing homes, assisted living facilities, intellectual and developmental disability settings, and mental health facilities. Merritt said the increase reflects expanding advocacy needs and encouraged volunteer recruitment to help staff maintain friendly visitation while allowing the ombudsmen to focus on case management.

Merritt also updated the Board on the Regional Senior Needs Assessment, which began in February and continues through June. Thus far, 569 surveys have been completed, reaching 77 percent of the regional goal of 740 surveys. Merritt expressed optimism that the Region will surpass its target, especially compared to 370 responses gathered during the previous assessment cycle five years earlier. The response data will play a critical role in shaping future Area Plans and service priorities and Merritt encouraged Board members to distribute surveys among seniors, caregivers and families.

Merritt said the Aging program is currently in an active monitoring period involving both provider oversight and Department on Aging reviews. Thus far, reviewers have expressed strong satisfaction with Upper Savannah's assessment quality, outreach engagement, family caregiver services and home care program management.

Merritt said she and Assistant Director of Aging Programs Langley Richardson appreciate the Aging team's accomplishments, reflecting teamwork, professionalism and dedication. She said these efforts are directly improving service access, community awareness and quality of life for older adults across the Upper Savannah Region.

Willie Norman also praised Stroud for her presentation at a recent AARP meeting in Greenwood, and Merritt highlighted the success of the Aging Division's spiral-bound services booklet, which provides seniors and caregivers with easy-to-navigate contact information for programs and services throughout the Region.

<p>FY 25 Audit Review</p>	<p>Assistant Director Sam Leaman presented Upper Savannah’s audit report for FY 2025. During FY 2025, revenues exceeded expenses by \$79,916. At year end, the fund balance was \$1,992,520. Leaman reviewed the audit summary document with the Board. Leaman thanked Upper Savannah Finance Director Melissa Phillips for her work on the audit. Miliken Matthews made a motion to pass the audit, properly seconded by Albert Talbert.</p>
<p>Nominating Committee Appointment</p>	<p>Charles Jennings announced appointments to the Nominating Committee for fiscal years 2027-2028. Floyd Nicholson was appointed as chair, joined by Wes McAllister and Albert Talbert. Nicholson said he would report back in June about nominations for 27-28 Board chairman and vice chairman.</p>
<p>Board Member Updates</p>	<p>The floor was opened to Board members to report on items of interest from their communities.</p> <p>Matthew Brownlee reported Laurens County’s courthouse renovation is complete, with ribbon cutting scheduled for May 15. He also highlighted success at Laurens County’s Agriculture Center, which recently hosted two major agriculture shows attracting 11,300 visitors, including 4,500 first-time visitors to the county. Brownlee also said the county’s new emergency services building will open in June and highlighted a \$350 million industrial investment projected to create 564 jobs.</p> <p>Albert Talbert reported a successful ribbon cutting ceremony for Northside Park in Edgefield County.</p> <p>Tiffani Ireland said she and Talbert were honored to attend Strom Thurmond High School’s ring ceremony for its football state championship and awarded the team with a proclamation. She said Edgefield County’s recreation department continues to grow, adding more classes including yoga while gearing up for summer camps. She also congratulated Ken Durham on his reelection as Mayor of Edgefield.</p> <p>McCormick Mayor Roy Smith Jr. reported successful completion of the veterans memorial and parking lot project, thanking USCOG Community Development Director Keith Smith for his contributions to the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program project. Smith said the Town’s ribbon cutting ceremony April 2 was well attended.</p> <p>Dayne Pruitt shared updates regarding redevelopment at the former Adams and Sloan plant property in Ninety Six into an Amazon delivery facility and also said there will be a new residential development in Ninety Six.</p> <p>Miliken Matthews reported that Saluda County’s renovated former dry-cleaning building will soon open as an indoor pickleball facility and also a children’s reading center with help from the Saluda County First Steps Program. He also expressed gratitude for the hiring of Rich Caplan as new town administrator, a position which had been vacant for a couple years.</p> <p>Faye Thomas said the Chestnut Street Park renovations CDBG project in the City of Abbeville had a successful ribbon cutting in March and invited Board members to visit the park</p>

<p>Executive Director's Report</p>	<p>Executive Director Patricia C. Hartung updated the Board regarding recurring state funding for South Carolina's Councils of Government. She reminded the board that that the statewide COGs together receive approximately \$1.5 million in recurring appropriations through the S.C. General Assembly, which is distributed among the 10 COGs statewide. One-half of the appropriation is divided equally among all COGs, while the remaining half is distributed based on population. Because Upper Savannah represents approximately four percent of the state's population, it receives the smallest portion of the population-based allocation.</p> <p>Hartung reported that for the current year, the COGs collectively received an additional \$443,747 in recurring funding approved by the legislature. She said this increase is included in recurring appropriations rather than a one-time proviso. Upper Savannah's portion of the increase is approximately \$23,000.</p> <p>Hartung said the appropriation includes language designating funds for financial and accounting-related functions, and that clarification is being sought from state officials in Columbia regarding the intended use and implementation of those funds. She also remarked on ongoing local government challenges in recruiting qualified accounting and finance personnel.</p> <p>Hartung thanked Board meeting guest Susan Jackson from Congresswoman Sheri Biggs' office for helping arrange a visit from Biggs, who spent a significant amount of time learning about Upper Savannah's programs. Hartung said Biggs was particularly focused on Upper Savannah's workforce development and aging programs.</p> <p>Hartung reminded Board members to review the activity reports included in their packets and to contact staff with any questions.</p>
<p>Adjourn</p>	<p>Being no other business, the meeting was adjourned.</p>

Patricia C. Hartung
Executive Director