

**MINUTES
 BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING
 UPPER SAVANNAH COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS
 DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION
 430 HELIX ROAD
 GREENWOOD, SOUTH CAROLINA
 APRIL 28, 2025**

MEMBERS PRESENT: Jackie Brown, John Calhoun, Jim Coleman, Frank Daniel, Qwen Etheredge, Charles Goodwin, Charlie Henry, Shirley Jenkins, Charles Jennings, Theo Lane, Miliken Matthews, Marian Miller, Willie Norman, Ernie Segars, Brandon Smith, Don Smoak, Albert Talbert, Faye Thomas, and Anita Williams.

MEMBERS ABSENT: Ken Durham, Otis Grier Jr., Tiffani Ireland, Sen. Shane Massey, Wes McAllister, Matthew Miller, Sen. Floyd Nicholson, David Sawyer, Roy Smith Jr., and Sen. Danny Verdin.

STAFF PRESENT: Patricia Hartung, Sam Leaman, Rick Green, Peggy Merritt, Melissa Phillips, Kal Kunkel, David Hays

GUESTS PRESENT: Diane Lackey, Office of Public Transit (OPT) Operations Manager; Renee Miller-Cotton, OPT Regional Transit Operations Program Manager; Rebecca Gleason, Jennifer McFarlane and David Kack, Western Transportation Institute (WTI) at Montana State University, Bozeman, Mt., via Zoom; Al Jenkins, Regional Director, Senator Tim Scott's office; Susan Jackson, District Outreach Director, U.S. Representative Sheri Biggs' office; Kevin McLaughlin, SCDOT Region 2 Administrator, SCDOT

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.</p> <p>Jennings introduced new Board member Anita Williams from Laurens County.</p>
Guest Presentation: Office of Public Transit – SC Department of Transportation	<p>SC Department of Transportation Office of Public Transit (OPT) Operations Manager Diane Lackey and OPT Regional Transit Operations Program Manager Renee Miller-Cotton gave report on current activities at SCDOT and the Office of Public Transit.</p> <p>Lackey gave a PowerPoint presentation on Momentum 250, an SCDOT statewide multimodal long-range transportation plan which sets the tone for the future. The Plan focuses on emerging trends, including increasing freight movement, port growth, population growth of an additional million, and increased technology including electric vehicles.</p> <p>Goals listed in Momentum 250 include providing maintenance for existing roads and bridges, decreasing fatal accidents, investing in an interstate system to support the movement of freight and people across South Carolina, addressing urban and rural mobility, and deepening multimodal partnerships including ports and railroads.</p> <p>Miller-Cotton gave overview of the Office of Public Transit, which is responsible for the administration and management of Federal and State programs that support public transportation in South Carolina. The Office also coordinates with Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), COGs, and other public and private entities to provide technical assistance on transportation activities. She said a strong multimodal</p>

	<p>and freight transportation network is integral to South Carolina’s economic vitality and quality of life. Additional focus areas include adding federal, state and locally funded transit projects to the Statewide Transportation Improvement Plan (STIP).</p> <p>Lackey gave overview of the statewide Freight and Rail Program, which plans, develops, maintains and coordinates the comprehensive statewide freight and rail transit.</p> <p>Jackie Brown asked if the Section 5311 rural transportation program can assist McCormick Area Transit (MAT) with funding to address its bus shortage. Lackey said she is aware of MAT’s funding shortage and that MAT is on a list requesting funding. She said the local match for federal funding is a challenge for agencies statewide. Lackey said Momentum 2050 is hoping to address the rural transportation funding gap. She said the OPT will be working with COGs on regional transportation issues in the future.</p> <p>Lackey said SCDOT has made the electronic newsletter The Connector available to help keep citizens updated on projects, special events and other news.</p>
<p>Western Transportation Institute (WTI) at Montana State University</p>	<p>Government Services Director Rick Green said an e-mail from the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) last fall asked if there were any local transportation projects that might need technical assistance grant funding. Green replied that three of this Region’s counties – Abbeville, Laurens and Saluda – do not have public transportation. Upper Savannah was awarded a grant to work with the Western Transportation Institute (WTI) based at Montana State University to create a public transportation feasibility study, which is a necessary first step in creating a system.</p> <p>WTI Research Engineer Rebecca Gleason gave a presentation via Zoom, updating the Board on the progress of their feasibility study. She said the study is funded by the USDA Rural Business Cooperative Service and coordinated by NADO. The goal of the study is to develop transportation options for Abbeville, Laurens and Saluda counties. She said WTI’s first step was looking at previous studies regarding public transportation in Upper Savannah’s rural counties, dating back to 2010 including analysis on economic and census information. She said WTI is taking a broad view of transportation options, including examples of rural transportation systems nearby including some fixed routes and others that are on-demand via phone call or app. WTI hopes to build on previous studies and make this current study community-driven by forming local advisory teams. The study looks at trends on who needs transportation for medical care, education, employment, social services, etc., when they go and where they go.</p> <p>Gleason offered a project timeline. The study began in March, they are working on stakeholder outreach in May and June, planning to visit the Region June 10-12 to have meetings with advisory teams; will be analyzing data, networking with peers, and identifying best practices in July/August, and providing a final report in September.</p> <p>WTI Program Manager David Kack added via Zoom that options could include van pooling, volunteer programs and carpooling, saying not every solution must focus on a traditional public transportation system.</p>

<p>Upper Savannah Rural Planning Work Program (RPWP)</p>	<p>Government Services Director Rick Green requested approval of the USCOG Rural Planning Work Program (RPWP) for 2025-27 as e-mailed to Board members. The RPWP provides technical assistance funding from the SCDOT planning office to COGs each year. The full copy of the RPWP document has been posted to the Upper Savannah web site. The RPWP was approved upon motion by Albert Talbert and properly seconded.</p>
<p>Upper Savannah Aging Program Update and Report</p>	<p>Area Agency on Aging Director Peggy Merritt informed the Board how current events at the federal level are impacting the COG's Aging program and gave an overview of recent region-wide activities.</p> <p>Merritt said despite the federal funding uncertainty, it is important to plan rather than panic. She gave a PowerPoint presentation detailing the challenges the Area Agency on Aging (AAA) is facing. The federal funding freeze was rescinded in January and then a Continuing Resolution was passed on March 15 allowing states to receive funding at the FY '24 rate. But funding and communication have been slowed by the elimination of the Administration for Community Living (ACL) budget team and changes in the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Only 45 percent of the federal funding has been received so far, Merritt said. Also, the reauthorization of the Older Americans Act is pending. And American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding which has been used in Aging programs might be called back.</p> <p>The Upper Savannah AAA is adjusting budgets to maintain funding levels for seniors currently receiving services. While the AAA is not adding senior clients, staff will continue assessing seniors for services in hopes that federal funding will be received and/or state funding will be increased, she said.</p> <p>Merritt said limited funding for services for the region has resulted in longer wait lists or stopping programs, the inability to fulfill contracted funding amounts with providers, and limited funding for staffing the AAA. She said the Chore and Minor Home Repair funding has been reallocated to more urgent needs, current recipients of home-delivered meals and transportation will continue receiving services into the new fiscal year, and current homemaker and personal care clients will continue to receive services. Clients will not be removed from wait lists but will remain in priority order based on who has the most needs. She said assessments will continue to identify needs in the community, programs will continue until funding ends, and current state funding has been shifted for more immediate needs.</p> <p>Merritt said the Draft Federal FY26 Budget proposes reorganizing the DHHS. The Older Americans Act services under ACL is being divided between two different DHHS offices: Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) and Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The PowerPoint listed which programs are going to CMS or ACF.</p> <p>According to the national association representing and supporting the network of Area Agencies on Aging, called USAging, the Draft Presidential Budget proposes to eliminate the following: Preventive Health Services, Long-Term Care Ombudsman, State Health Insurance Assistance Programs (SHIPs), Elder Falls Prevention discretionary grants, Lifespan Respite Care grants to states, Chronic Disease Self-Management Education discretionary grants, Elder Rights support activities, Elder Justice/Adult</p>

	<p>Protective Services, and Aging and Disability Resource Centers grants to state. The Upper Savannah currently has Ombudsman and SHIP programs.</p> <p>Merritt told Board members they can assist the AAA and seniors by sharing our services with the local community so they know how vital USCOG/AAA is to the Region, contact local Senators and Representatives requesting state funding to cover gaps in federal funding, and contact U.S. Senators and Representatives to advocate for keeping Older Americans Act services together and to increase funding levels.</p> <p>Merritt showed a pictorial slide of the AAA’s nine staff members, citing each of their responsibilities. She said that despite the funding uncertainties, they continue to pursue this year’s goal of “reaching the Region.” They have done so by making monthly visits to senior centers including Abbeville, Laurens and McCormick thus far, attending community outreach events, attending an assisted living facility open house, and speaking to church groups. Ombudsman staff hosted a Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program Workshop. She said Upper Savannah now has 11 volunteer Ombudsman, all recruited in the past year.</p> <p>Merritt said the Index-Journal recently published two articles, one on the overall Aging program and the other on an Upper Savannah Family Caregiver Support Program participant caring for a disabled adult child who also became a volunteer Ombudsman. Both were front-page articles.</p> <p>She said participants in the Family Caregiver Support program can now submit forms and applications online at the Upper Savannah website at bottom of the Area Agency on Aging page.</p> <p>Merritt listed the following upcoming events in which AAA staff will participate including Senior Day in Columbia May 1, GLEAMNS Community Action Day at Piedmont Technical College May 16, Caregiver Luncheon at New Journey Church in Greenwood May 19, The Renaissance Senior Living event June 26, and Veterans Appreciation Day at Greenwood Veteran’s office July 16. Merritt said staff is available to speak to other groups or appear at other events.</p> <p>Executive Director Patricia C. Hartung added that Merritt is researching how the State Unit on Aging can be more financially flexible, including moving funds from one program to another, and allowing staff to be trained via Zoom to perform other duties.</p> <p>Regional Director for Senator Tim Scott’s office Al Jenkins said he is willing to help veterans who have not received their benefits. Jenkins asked if the AAA has found anyone who has been declared dead. Merritt said staff have ways to find out if any of their senior clients have passed away, including reading obituaries and getting reports from providers if a client does not respond when visited.</p>
<p>FY 2024 Audit Report</p>	<p>Assistant Director Sam Leaman presented Upper Savannah’s audit report for FY 2024. During FY 2024, revenues exceeded expenses by \$116,234. At year end, the fund balance was \$1,912,604. Leaman reviewed the audit summary document with the Board. Leaman thanked Upper Savannah Finance Director Melissa Phillips for her work on the audit. Jim Coleman made a motion to pass the audit, properly seconded by Willie Norman.</p>

<p>Executive Director's Report</p>	<p>Hartung noted the new use of meeting folder packets with handouts and information at each member's seat today. In future meetings, each Board member will receive a packet with the Agenda, staff reports, items that are being discussed at the meeting, and a list of guests present for the meeting.</p> <p>Hartung reiterated the impact on the COG regarding federal funding instability, particularly in the Aging program, as described by Peggy Merritt in her presentation today. She said Upper Savannah is not the only agency impacted by federal funding uncertainties. She noted that during her State Senate Subcommittee budget hearing in March regarding COG statewide appropriations, she received numerous questions from legislators on whether our seniors are being impacted by the funding shortfalls. Hartung told the Board she hoped the Aging funding situation would not result in service interruptions for seniors and that the federal funding delays (resulting from the reorganization of the US Department of Health and Human services) would be addressed soon.</p> <p>All COG directors are meeting May 7 in Columbia for a work session to discuss programmatic impacts affected by federal funding delays and uncertainties.</p> <p>Hartung said Upper Savannah's EDA regional representative Robin Cooley resigned earlier this year and joined the S.C. Rural Infrastructure Authority. Hartung said Cooley was instrumental in helping the Region acquire numerous EDA grants, including the most recent \$11.27 million grant to fund Piedmont Technical College's new Health Sciences Building. She said USCOG will recognize Cooley at the June meeting of the COG directors.</p>
<p>Adjourn</p>	<p>Being no other business, the meeting was adjourned.</p>



Patricia C. Hartung
Executive Director