

Aiken County History

Aiken County was established in 1871 by combining portions of Edgefield, Lexington, Orangeburg and Barnwell Counties. It was governed by a group of locally elected members of the South Carolina General Assembly known as "the Delegation".

There were also the traditional elected local County officials such as Sheriff, Treasurer, Superintendent of Roads and Superintendent of Education, etc. This "County Delegation" Form of Government served the County well for 100 years until 1972.

CONDITIONS CHANGE

Conditions changed by 1972. The County Delegation members were finding themselves strapped for time. Sessions of the General Assembly had lengthened to six months. Upon returning home to make a living, members' telephones rang constantly, conveying County problems. The Delegation decided that the County could justify a full-time local government. An outline was drawn up for a new government and submitted to the State, which passed it promptly. The new form of government, termed the Aiken County Commission, was signed into law by Governor John West in March 1972.

This new Commission consisted of seven members; one each from four established school districts, two additional members and a Commission Chairman elected from the County as a whole. They were empowered to pass laws, create an annual budget, staff departments to provide public services, and impose and collect taxes to finance their operation. On Election Day in November 1972, seven persons were elected to the Commission. The following morning, they were sworn-in as Commissioners and became the first local government of Aiken County.

AN ACCOUNTING

The following writing is not a history. It presents a number of problems facing the new local government and its successful efforts to solve them. In the interest of brevity, many complex programs are compacted into a paragraph or two. Many participating individuals and organizations are not specifically mentioned. County Government could not function without such cooperation, which is always acknowledged and appreciated. The narratives are presented as simply and with the maximum brevity possible by the author

ON THE JOB

Since none of the seven newly elected Commissioners had previous experience in government, it was fortunate that Road Superintendent Mackey Scott was

available to answer questions and continue to provide County services until the Commission became completely functional. Office space was obtained in the old County jail behind the courthouse. A clerk was hired and regular public meetings began. They were held in the meeting room of the County Health Department on Richland Avenue. The seven Commissioners all had full-time employment other than running County operations. It was decided to hire a full-time administrator to oversee day-to-day operations. Accordingly, ads were placed, candidates interviewed and a qualified administrator placed in charge.

NEW HOSPITAL

The first problem facing the new government was a shortage of physicians and overcrowded conditions at the County Hospital. Many prospects were invited to join the medical community, but one look at the antiquated hospital was enough to turn them off. Having decided to obtain a new, well-equipped facility, the Commission investigated two concepts - constructing a new County hospital or inviting a private corporation to build one. A series of public hearings throughout the County presented the alternatives to the public.

The final decision in 1974 favored a private hospital and the Hospital Corporation of America became the provider. Construction of a 190 bed, state-of-the-art hospital began in 1974. Following its start-up in 1976, the hospital proved an attraction to physicians and patients alike. Over the succeeding years it has continued to add physicians, facilities and equipment far exceeding health facilities in communities the size of Aiken. An ironic result of selecting a private hospital, which cost no tax money but even paid taxes, was that all Commissioners who voted for the change were soundly defeated in the 1974 election.

EXPANDING SPACE

Increased staffing of the Savannah River Site and other new industries resulting in a population explosion in Aiken County. Existing government facilities were grossly undersized. Additional personnel required more office space. Frequent and longer terms of court consumed courthouse space occupied by non-court functions.

The vacated old County hospital was a sturdy and fireproof structure. Using some funding held for possible construction of a County hospital and grant dollars, the building was converted into County offices. There was adequate left-over space to house the Public Health offices, treatment personnel, and equipment in the same building. The 6,000 square foot building vacated by Public Health was converted into a County government meeting room and office facility.

HOME RULE ACT

By 1974, the identical conditions that caused the Aiken County Delegation to create an Aiken County government became apparent across the entire State. Accordingly, the General Assembly approved Act 283 of 1975, known as "The Home Rule Act". This act gave State voters the option of selecting one of five different forms of County home government. In a subsequent referendum, Aiken County voters chose the "Council-Administrator" Form of Government. The County was divided into eight single member districts of equal population. One Council member was elected from each district and a Council Chairman was elected from the County as a whole. During the period of transition from the old to the new form of government, three Commissioners retained two years of their elected terms. They stayed on to complete the two years, temporarily creating a 12 member governing body.

WASTEWATER TREATMENT

To reduce residential, commercial, and industrial pollution in the western portion of the County and support future growth needs throughout the County, the Aiken County Public Service Authority was created in 1973. A \$38 million facility, constructed at the confluence of the Horse Creek and Savannah River, provides modern wastewater treatment and disposal for the western portion of Aiken County as well as portions of Edgefield and Saluda Counties.

The facility currently provides a treatment service capacity of 22 million gallons per day with an expansion capability to 40 million gallons and also hosts a regional composting operation to convert sludge by-products into fertilizer for land application in the region. The Aiken County Public Service Authority is a department of the Aiken County Government and is supported by user fees.

COUNTY "SATELLITES"

Because Aiken County approximates the State of Rhode Island in area, many County services are miles away from some citizens, particularly those with low income. Small "satellite" buildings have been established to provide services including emergency medical services and law enforcement in Belvedere, Clearwater, Langley and Wagener. Public and Mental Health services were added in North Augusta.

With over one-half of the County's citizens holding library cards, books were loaned on an outreach program using a travel bookmobile. In 1989, population growth and demand for reading material justified rebuilding the Aiken County main library in an abandoned grammar school at a cost of \$1.7 million. During the same year, a new library was built in North Augusta at a cost of \$1.3 million and a smaller library was constructed in Wagener costing \$55,000. In 1992 the old Langley Depot, relocated to land donated by the J. M. Huber Corporation in Langley and renovated, was opened as the Midland Valley Branch Library. The Town of Jackson donated space for use as a Jackson Branch Library, which

opened in 1991. The County was the focal point of these valuable additions but they were also underwritten by intensive public subscription campaigns. In 1994, the County obtained the deed to the remaining half of the Old Aiken Elementary School from the Aiken County Board of Education for expansion room for the Aiken Library.

Population increases and a demand for facilities to implement healthy life-styles and to provide outlets for youthful energy created a need for public recreation installations. Playing fields were constructed in Belvedere, Clearwater and Wagener, the latter also included a building for holding community functions. Boat landings were constructed on the Savannah River at Jackson and on the South Edisto River at Davis Bridge, Aiken State Park, and New Holland Road. The Gregg- Graniteville Foundation made a generous gift to the County of an abandoned recreation facility at Graniteville, which included a large brick building and swimming pool. This has become the County's Recreation Center which has continued to have extensive use year-round. The County now operates 24 parks in all areas of the County. Two additional parks are in the process of being developed. The Roy Warner Park in Wagener, the Harrison Caver Park in Clearwater, and the Recreation Center in Graniteville are all staffed facilities that provide various programs year round.

JUDICIAL CONCERNS

As sessions of the Second Judicial Circuit Court in Aiken grew longer, the limitations of the 100-year-old courthouse became overpowering. Because of distracting traffic noise from outside, poor acoustics and general inconvenience, the resident Circuit Judge refused to hear further cases in the building. County Council appointed an Ad Hoc Citizens Committee and employed an architect to build a new facility or renovate the existing one.

Although County Council was divided in opinion, a majority selected renovation of the old building to preserve the historic character of downtown Aiken and eliminate the inconvenience of locating a new facility elsewhere. An early recommendation of the Ad Hoc Committee was to microfilm existing court records. This not only guaranteed the integrity of the records by duplicating them in another location but also saved the cost of a complete floor in the renovated courthouse. In the final revision, roomy and attractive courtrooms were provided for Circuit Court, Family Court, Probate and Equity Courts. The funding totaled \$4.7 million through grants and a County bond issue. Delegations from South Carolina and other states have visited Aiken to examine the unique features of the structure.

The minor courts of the County, staffed by magistrates, were scattered across the County. Courts were held in miscellaneous buildings, sometimes in the Magistrate's home. They routinely were characterized by poor bookkeeping and subject to the practice of "judge shopping". The majority of cases were traffic

violations. Following years of controversy, a Central Traffic Court was established in Aiken. By scheduling law enforcement officer's cases simultaneously, traffic officers have used their time more efficiently by spending more time on patrol. Magistrates, some originally opposed to the Central Court, have found it released more of their time due to rotating duties at the new court.

EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES

EMS in Aiken County began in 1972 as Paramedical Services of South Carolina, a private enterprise that operated until July of 1975, at which time Aiken County purchased the ambulance service. Over the past twenty-five years EMS has grown from three ambulances and approximately 2,000 calls in 1972 to twelve ambulances, a rescue truck, a disaster emergency response vehicle, and 13,183 calls in 1999. EMS has grown from five stations to eight stations, which are located throughout the County, and advances in vehicles, equipment and training have reduced mortality and morbidity in Aiken County. The service continues to keep abreast of the most current information related to this field in order to provide the best pre-hospital care available to the citizens. Aiken County EMS was recognized as South Carolina Large System of the Year in 1991, and again in 1997.

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

When disaster strikes Aiken County the Emergency Preparedness personnel are ready to respond. They do so by planning, coordinating, responding and assisting in mitigating all types of disasters as they may occur in Aiken County. They are prepared for natural hazards such as tornados, hurricanes, floods and severe weather, as well as hazardous material releases and other related incidents. In 1997, through many hours of coordinating efforts, paid personnel and many volunteers, the County's first Spill Response Team was ready to respond. This team is responsible for handling hazardous material incidents such as chemical emergencies which range from diesel spills to toxic gases. Emergency Preparedness is dedicated to protecting the lives and property of Aiken County.

SAVANNAH RIVER RESEARCH CAMPUS

In 1990, County Council began researching the feasibility of creating a Research Park within Aiken County to take advantage of technology at the Savannah River Site and to further diversify the economy of Aiken County. In 1992, Westinghouse donated 422 acres of land adjacent to the site to Aiken County. A conceptual plan was approved, marketing started, and County staff hired. The first building, the Cooperative Research Center (CRC), was dedicated on March 18, 1995. Many businesses have rented space at the CRC, creating approximately 65 jobs. Allied Technology Group (ATG) has purchased 30 acres of land at the park, and additional commercial tenants are planned. On January

19, 2001, Aiken County announced that a Technology Laboratory will be constructed adjacent to the established Cooperative Research Center, which is located just two miles from the intersection of highways US 278 and 19. The cost of the project is \$2.7 million dollars and totals 21,000 square feet in size. Aiken County and Westinghouse Savannah River Company signed an 8 year lease agreement including the laboratory and administrative space at the Cooperative Research Center. Occupancy of the laboratory is scheduled for October, 2001.

SAGE MILL INDUSTRIAL PARK

In February of 1996, Aiken County purchased a 1,150 acre parcel of land situated at the northeast quadrant of the intersection of I-20 (exit 11) and Bettis Academy Road. The property was purchased for the purpose of developing Sage Mill Industrial Park. The site of the park is considered ideal for such a development; however, the site lacked the necessary infrastructure to support the desired industries.

Concurrently, with the purchase of the land, SKF USA, Inc. announced plans to build a new assembly plant within the park. The employment at this facility created approximately 275 new jobs. Construction of the plant began immediately on a 50 acre tract of land located in the southwest corner of the park. SKF took partial occupancy of the facility the first week of December 1996. The plant began actual production in March 1997 and celebrated its grand opening on October 23, 1997.

While the SKF facility was under construction, Aiken County and the local utility providers worked together to establish the necessary infrastructure elements for the park. This effort resulted in the construction of roads, water and sewer lines, and electrical substation, a telephone terminal building, a natural gas pipeline and a water system all within the park.

In January of 1997, Avondale Mills, a local textile manufacturer announced its intent to construct a distribution center within the park. This facility created approximately 50 jobs. The facility was built on a 50 acre tract of land in the northwest corner of the park. Avondale Mills began operating out of this facility in December 1997. The construction of the Avondale Mills distribution facility required the extension of the utility services previously installed and the construction of additional roads.

On August 26, 1997, Bridgestone/Firestone Inc. announced its plans to construct a new tire manufacturing facility on a 585 acre tract of land adjacent to Sage Mill Industrial Park. Employment projections for this project are estimated at 800 new jobs. The first tires were shipped in March 1999. In December 1999, ground was broken for a \$24.5 million expansion of Bridgestone/Firestone. The decision by Bridgestone to locate the facility in Aiken County was partly due to the existence of the infrastructure at Sage Mill Industrial Park. However, the construction of the

Bridgestone manufacturing facility has resulted in the need to further develop the infrastructure within the park and required the construction of a railroad lead track to serve the Bridgestone site. An emergency services substation housing ambulance and fire services for Sage Mill was opened in 1999.

ARNCO and Standard Distribution Center have also located at Sage Mill.

Sage Mill Industrial Park contains over 800 acres of remaining land available for development. The industrial park master plan has been developed to provide flexibility in the subdivision of the property to help meet the specific needs of potential industries. In addition to the land available within the park, there are over 2,000 acres of undeveloped timberland in the vicinity that can be served by the infrastructure that has been developed for Sage Mill Industrial Park.

PUBLIC WORKS/ENGINEERING

The Public Works/Engineering Department maintains approximately 1,000+ miles of dirt roads and approximately 250+ miles of paved roads. The department also manages the C&D Landfill (construction, demolition and land debris), ten (10) Drop-Off Recycling Centers, and transportation of waste to Three Rivers. They provide building & grounds maintenance and janitorial service for 60 County owned buildings. The County Shop provides vehicle maintenance for Sheriff, EMS and all County owned vehicles, including Road Maintenance Equipment.

The Public Works/Engineering Department also handles Animal Services, which include citizen's complaints of stray, nuisance, and vicious animals; to include cruelty & abandonment investigations. The County also offers spay/neuter adoptions at the facility located at 411 Wire Road.

AGENCIES

The County budgets approximately \$1 million annually to support 13 agencies providing specific benefits to its citizens. Examples include Helping Hands, which shelters children who are wards of the Family Court; the Economic Development Partnership which recruits new industry; and a Dual Taxation Fund which reimburses municipalities for city services duplicated by the County.

Agricultural Agencies - County farmers look to the agricultural agencies for help. These include Clemson Extension, Soil and Water Conservation, State Forestry Commission, and three other agencies. They had been crowded out of the courthouse, and with growing responsibilities and staffs, these agencies needed new facilities. A brick and steel building was designed and constructed on County owned land on Richland Avenue, East of Aiken. The architect placed the structure at a 45 degree angle to insure partial heating by the sun. A 2,200 square foot addition will be completed in 2001 to house additional USDA staff. Its

attractive meeting room, roomy offices and equipment have increased utilization of these farm agencies.

Social Services - for years Social Service agencies were divided into separate buildings. Welfare workers were crowded into the old County Road Commissioners' building on Williamsburg Street. This rickety building was poorly equipped and actually had holes in the floor. An architectural firm was commissioned to design a new building and funding was obtained from Federal and County sources. In 1986, the new, well-equipped brick and steel building was erected adjoining the Agricultural Building with an entrance on Park Avenue, in Aiken.

Historical Museum - the original County Historical Museum was housed in the old County jail behind the courthouse. When the courthouse was renovated, the demand for additional building and parking space required that this building be demolished. A majestic winter home known as Banksia on the south end of Newberry Street in Aiken was at this time being used as the County Library. It also had an empty 5,000 sq. ft. wing. This wing became the new home of the Museum by utilizing funds from the courthouse renovation. Several years later, when the weight of books exceeded the floor-loading capacity of Banksia, the Library was moved out of Banksia to the renovated Aiken Elementary School. The County in 1992 authorized the Historical Commission to occupy the entire Banksia structure.

Council on Aging - The Aiken Area Council on Aging provides assistance to older citizens, particularly those with low income. With funding from State and Federal sources and some County assistance, it supplies Meals-on-Wheels, congregate meals across the County, employment for the elderly and other services to our aging population.

A vacant 5,500 sq. ft. building, at one time a teen activities headquarters, was located on County owned property on Morgan Street behind the old County hospital. In 1980, when the Council on Aging exceeded the capacity of a converted residence used for office, the County made this facility available at \$1 per year on a 99 year lease. With volunteer help, it was converted into attractive offices and also a large meeting hall.

LAW ENFORCEMENT AND DETENTION

With expanding personnel and equipment, by the late 70's the County Sheriff exceeded the space provided in the jail building constructed in the 1960's. Also during the 1960's, a 5,000 sq. ft. steel structure had been attached to the front of what was then the Aiken County hospital. In 1980, this was relocated by a house-moving firm to a new foundation on County owned property adjoining the County jail. Using funds from a jail expansion fund, it was renovated into the Sheriff's headquarters and also the County Dispatch Center for law enforcement,

Emergency Medical and fire calls. This latter addition doubled in value when the County adopted the 911 call system. On January 1, 2000, a new communication center was opened, with equipment designed for the modern world of communications, purchased from 911 telephone surcharges.

Providing housing for suspected and convicted prisoners has, over the years, been likened to hitting a moving target for County Council. Increasing crime rates doubled and tripled the arrests by city police, County deputies, and State and Federal agents, overflowing the capacity of the County's only facility. Prisoners sleeping on the floor, overtaxed food and sanitary services brought press and TV complaints and court edicts to baffle the Council.

A \$2.5 million County bond issue financed renovations to increase the building's capacity to 100 prisoners and meet constantly stiffening federal prison guidelines. Difficulties were encountered during construction. Decisions made at the close of one Sheriff's term of office were overturned when a new Sheriff was elected with different ideas.

Responsibility for the operation of the Detention Center was passed from the Sheriff to the County Administrator in 1985. With a continuing increase in the prisoner population, the County undertook to implement programs to reduce the inmate population, including work release and home detention programs that have met with limited success.

In 1997 the County initiated action to obtain design and construction services to build a new 350 bed facility on County owned property. The new facility, slated for completion in 2001, will have an expansion capacity to 500 beds and be capable of meeting incarceration needs well into the 21st Century. The design of the facility is divided into six separate housing units and includes support space for intake and booking, property storage, visitation, medical services, work release programs, kitchen and laundry services, and jail administration. The facility will also have office space for a Circuit Judge and Magistrate and a courtroom for initial arraignments, bond hearings and issuance of warrants.

MATTIE C. HALL

When the old Aiken County hospital was vacated, the public consensus was that it should be converted into a nursing home - a facility sorely needed. However, when an architect qualified in nursing home design was hired, such conversion was ruled out. State requirements had altered sufficiently that it proved less expensive to construct a new building. Consequently the old hospital was converted to office and public health use.

In researching designs for a new facility, Council members visited a number of sites. A design by an upper State construction company proved attractive, practical and economical in cost. Negotiations with the County School Board

yielded a desirable parcel of land bordering Highway 19 near Aiken City's northern boundary. Since Federal and State law required a "Certificate of Need", the County was forced to attend public hearings in competition with other nursing home applicants. The County's application prevailed and construction began for a 132 bed building on the selected site.

County Council's research had also discovered a private corporation with an excellent reputation for operating such institutions. National Health Corporation was signed to operate the Aiken home, which was named "the Mattie C. Hall Health Care Center"; honoring a former philanthropic lady who established a fund to support health care for indigents. The \$2.7 million cost of construction was financed by revenue bonds, which are paid off by income from patients and therefore used no taxpayer moneys. Fortunately for the County (and the taxpayer), National Health Corporation underwrote the bond issue.

The Mattie C. Hall Center has proved popular, having an occupancy rate of 99%, one of the highest in the State. A recent expansion project, financed by the operator has added 44 additional beds to satisfy the area's needs. A County appointed Board oversees the operation to insure continuing high standards.

FINANCING

Citizens sometimes ask, "Why is it necessary to raise taxes for County services when we could provide these needs for so little 25 years ago?" The increase from the 1972 budget of \$4.7 million to the present 2000 budget of \$66.5 million illustrates this. Most of the increase can be attributed to the increase in the size of the County's operating plant as recounted in the preceding pages. Conditions have changed; inflation has increased the cost of salaries, wages and materials; and expectations of County services by citizens have grown.

In 1972, all road work was done by chain gang members, fed for \$2.50 per day. Trucks, graders and other equipment were purchased at give-away prices during State surplus sales. Prisoners lived under conditions that would call forth an immediate court injunction in our times. Probably with some exaggeration, one CPA conducting the annual audit in those days claimed that he had to reconstruct a set of books for the County before he could perform the audit.

Since then, County employees have been covered by health insurance and other benefits which increase in cost at a rate familiar to all. Federal and State mandates and bureaucratic requirements have multiplied the responsibilities of County employees, causing office staffs to double and triple. A 1988 study by the South Carolina Commission on Intergovernmental Relations reported that, as of 1988, there were 683 mandates by State government, 93% of which were directly applicable to counties. A mandate legally directs an action without funding. The increase in County population to over 130,000 has increased the demand for roads, both paved and unpaved. Solid waste disposal, and County-

wide recreation programs have been added. Building regulations guarantee good construction but their enforcement costs dollars, County road equipment must be maintained justifying a well equipped shop at a cost of \$175,000. Looking at the financing side; in 1972 out of the \$4.7 million budget for 1972, the Delegation had the General Assembly appropriate \$1.8 million in what is termed "Aid to Subdivisions". The present County government has no way of guaranteeing such State funding.

PERSONNEL

Those citizens elected to serve on the governing body of the County have as their responsibility the setting of policy and the control of expenditures. During the twenty-eight years covered by this account the following individuals have performed these services:

James B. Baggott	Forest L. Kirby
James L. Bland	Homer L. McGee
J. Allen Brodie	H. M. McElhaney
Wade Brodie	LaWana McKenzie
William E. Butler	Larry Murphy
William Clyburn	Philip A. Napier
Ralph F. Cullinan	Rick Osbon
L. Vernon Davis	John H. Pound
Eugene A. Duckett	Joann Price
Melvin E. Dunbar	Charles W. Prosser
Cleve Edmunds	Joel F. Randall
Rosemary English	Kathy Rawls
Edwin E. Farmer	Lucas Ray
Russ Ferrara	Chuck Smith
Ray P. Garvin	Marilyn Smith
Susan W. Giddings	Mike Toole
Harold V. Graybeal	Billie Trapp
Walter C. Guy, Jr.	Carrol H. Warner
Fay Hatcher	Judith V. Warner
Willar Hightower, Jr.	Mim Woodring

Marion Holston

Ronald Young

Harold V. Graybeal served as Chairman of the original County Commission. Carrol H. Warner served continuously as Chairman of County Council from 1976 until his untimely death in 1994. Ronnie Young has served as Chairman of County Council from 1994 until present.

The County Administrator advises and implements the policies commissioned by the County governing body. The following individuals have served in this capacity:

Ronald V. LaCouture	1973 - 1974
Thomas F. Williams	1974 - 1975
Donnie J. Williams	1975 - 1977
L. C. Greene	1977 - 1981
W. Scott Barnes	1981 - 1991
William M. Shepherd	1992 - 2000

In a brief account, it is not possible to list all the elected and appointed officials who carry the government responsibilities of Aiken County. Also, there is not space to give credit deserved to the many employees who provide necessary services day after day.

CREDITS

The County depends on the cooperation of many individuals and groups including municipal, regional, State and Federal employees as well as private corporations. Without the advice, funding and support they provide, the County could not operate. Hundreds of unselfish citizens serve without pay as volunteers on County boards and commissions. The press and communication media inform the citizenry of County performance. The County would like to thank all the above individuals and groups who make possible the service they provide.

FUTURE

Most of the projects have proved successful. Federal EPA regulations are in the process of being implemented to require recycling solid waste and burying what cannot be recycled in highly restricted and expensive landfills. In order to meet these new standards, Aiken County has joined with eight other counties to create the Three Rivers Solid Waste Authority to develop procedures and equipment which will meet the requirements at the least cost to the taxpayers. This represents only one of the daunting problems facing the government during these uncertain times.

Increased demands by citizens for government services, coupled with demands for lower taxation rates, will challenge County government in the future. Expectations for a high quality of life without the means of resource supporting programs cannot be met when local government is restricted in financing initiatives from state government or subjected to unfounded mandates from state and federal agencies.

For local government to succeed in South Carolina, Home Rule must be fully implemented by the State's General Assembly. Then local government can not only be responsive to citizen demands and needs, but fully responsible to those same citizens for the provision of efficient and effective government.

A Publication of the Aiken County Public Information Office

Chris Ceasar, Public Information Officer

(2000)