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Charleston mayor makes a deal with peninsula neighborhood leaders ahead of sales tax priority vote

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Hagood Avenue frequently floods, even on sunny days. ANDREW J. WHITAKER/STAFF

FILE/ANDREW J. WHITAKER/STAFF

CHARLESTON — City Council approved a priority list of road and infrastructure projects that Charleston hopes to fund through a county-wide referendum that extends the half-cent transportation sales tax.

But just hours before the unanimous vote on Dec. 16, Mayor William Cogswell met with the presidents of four upper peninsula neighborhood associations who were ready to oppose the list.

In a letter to City Council dated Dec. 15, the coalition cited a lack of detail for the proposed “improvements” along seven streets on the Charleston peninsula, as well as concerns that most of the money would actually go to pay for the city’s portion of the seawall project meant to keep streets and homes on the peninsula dry as seas rise and storms become increasingly powerful.

Estimates project a 2026 transportation sales tax would raise about \$4.25 billion over 25 years, a 21 percent decrease from the \$5.4 billion expected from the 2024 tax that voters overwhelmingly rejected.

Of that \$4.25 billion, the city’s portion based on population would total just over \$2 billion, according to Cogswell’s rough estimates. He broke down the potential allocation by region of the city with \$225 million going toward projects on Johns Island; \$238 million to James Island; \$1.12 billion for West Ashley; and a quarter of the total, or about \$500 million, would be earmarked for projects on the peninsula.

“We certainly cannot support any projects—whether Uptown residents would prioritize them or not—when the city is already laying the foundation for disregarding the vote to be taken this week and use the money on a completely different project benefiting no one but the owners of the priciest homes in Charleston along the southern waterfront,” read the letter from the neighborhood associations dated Dec. 15.

It was signed by Kevin R. Eberle, president of the Hampton Park Terrace Neighborhood Association; Stephen Rosenberg, president of the North Central Neighborhood Association; Sarah Spangler, president of the Westside Neighborhood Association; and Jarett Nicholson, president of the Wagener Terrace Neighborhood Association.

They later withdrew their opposition after “assurances” from Cogswell that the city would limit the amount of the transportation sales tax dollars spent on the seawall project to \$300 million, leaving another \$200 million for other projects that would address issues like overburdened roadways, add bike lanes and sidewalks, and expand public transit.

A second letter dated Dec. 16 hit Council members' inboxes while they were already meeting in City Hall, so it's unclear if any of them knew the group had changed their minds when voting to approve the priority lists.

Cogswell is still working with staff and mobility advocates to come up with a list of bike, pedestrian and transit priority projects.

Here are the city's road project priorities:

Johns Island:

- Widen Maybank Highway between the Stono River and River Road — though Cogswell hopes this project will be funded ahead of another referendum vote. The estimated cost is about \$10 million.
- Add a southern pitchfork and roundabout on Maybank Highway, potentially eliminating the light at Fenwick Hall Allee, where the northern pitchfork meets Maybank.
- Widened portions of Main Road between Chisholm to Plow Ground roads and improve the intersection at Main and Maybank.
- Improve intersections and slow traffic flow along Maybank Highway from River and Main roads, where it can't be widened.

James Island:

- Add a second turn lane to Folly Road at the Maybank Highway intersection — similar to the widening of Maybank on Johns Island. Cogswell hopes this might get done ahead of a potential 2026 ballot.
- Add a left turn lane from Maybank Highway onto Riverland Drive for drivers heading toward Johns Island, while preventing left turns onto Riverland Drive for those heading off Johns Island.
- Partially raise Harbor View Road.

- Beautify **Folly Road improvements** already in the state Department of Transportation's pipeline.

West Ashley:

- Select widening of Savannah Highway, or U.S. Highway 17 South, along with drainage, intersection and safety improvements.
- Improvements at the intersection of Glenn McConnell Parkway and Magwood Drive.
- Partially raise Ashley River Road and add safety enhancements.

Peninsula:

- Flood mitigation improvements to Lockwood Drive and Hagood Avenue, which would tie into the western portion of the **Battery Extension project**, as well bike and pedestrian access.
- Flood mitigation improvements along East Bay Street, Concord Street and Morrison Drive, which will tie in to the eastern portion of the seawall.
- Improvements along Calhoun Street.
- Add bike lanes and sidewalks along Huger Street.

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Ali Rockett covers the city of Charleston, from inside City Hall to outer West Ashley. She previously worked at papers in Virginia and her home state of North Carolina.