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Bertie seeks PARTF funds

By **Gene Motley**

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WINDSOR – When completed, it will boast many of Bertie County’s quality attributes that can be shared by all its residents, and more.

Later this month, the county will submit an application prior to the March deadline for a NC Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) grant with the purpose of using those grant funds to enhance the waterfront recreational area known as TGOW.

The 147-acre public outdoor recreation park located on the eastern boundary of Bertie County at the confluence of the Chowan River and Albemarle Sound, referred to locally as “tall glass of water” (TGOW), until another name is selected, has been a top priority project of the Board of Commissioners for its ability to provide close-to-home vacation recreational experiences and year-round water access for Bertie County citizens.

A portion of the area, dubbed ‘Bertie Beach’, was opened this past June 2019 for water recreation.

The county hopes to provide not just public access to the water, but also use the area for the promotion of local assets, as an incubator for small business development, foster tourism, and generally improve the quality of life for all its residents.

Five firms submitted Qualification Statements to the Bertie County Commissioners providing recommendations for the development of the project and to assist with the PARTF grant application.

The Commissioners were seeking ways to provide adventure tourism activities; strategic business clusters identified as necessary for economic development; an educational venue for exploring Bertie’s natural and wildlife resources as well as historic significance; an outdoor music pavilion for the performing arts; cabins, RV area; primitive and group camping opportunities; small and large picnic shelters; hiking trails for fitness and exploration of some 2,200 linear feet of coastal waters for swimming, fishing and paddling.

On Dec. 30 the firm of Vines Architecture of Raleigh was selected to help spearhead the project and grant application. One week later, a TGOW Input Committee met at the Roanoke-Cashie River Center to hear from stakeholders in the project. Among them were representatives from Bertie County Schools, NC Land of Water (NCLOW), political leaders, the Mid-East Commission, First Colony Foundation, and county support team members with Economic Development, Parks and Recreation, Interim County Manager Juan Vaughan II, and TGOW Consultant and former County Manager Scott Sauer.



From left, Victor Vines, Qudre Joyner, Dave Hardin (Vines associate), Emily McCoy (turned away Vines associate), Juan Vaughan II, Jolie Thomas (Vines associate), Robin Payne, Joe Huff, Commissioner Ernestine Bazemore (seated), and Michael Freeman were part of a recent discussion about Bertie County’s “Tall Glass of Water” project. Contributed Photo

“The TGOW Input Committee was created as a resource for Vines Architecture to gain feedback and hear of local knowledge on the history of Bertie County, the needs of its citizens, educational opportunities for youth, outdoor recreation, activities for seniors and how TGOW can be accessed as a gathering place for social functions from festivals to baptisms to family picnics and music venues,” said TGOW Project Manager Robin Payne.

The group was welcomed by Bertie Commissioners Ernestine Bazemore and John Trent who discussed the Commissioners’ vision – water access, community recreation and educational opportunities.

“Mr. Vines and his firm really took the time to learn about Bertie County, capturing the county’s whole make-up,” said Bazemore. “We gave them input on what we desired to see on the TGOW site. More than anyone else, I want to see what Bertie County folks want this to be.”

Victor Vines, head of Vines Architecture, attended along with several of his staff that brought along graphics for illustrating several of their early ideas.

“I wouldn’t call it a vision just yet,” Vines explained. “We still have to do quite a bit more research on the site we’re looking to develop. What we found that was quite unique with this project is an opportunity for development, promotion of an eco-friendly environment, and water is always a great component to land development, and lastly, the historic significance of the site.”

Vines said understanding a cultural narrative of Bertie County needs to also be woven into the uniqueness of the project.

“A lot of our work we like to do is if there is something of significance for young people we want to stress the educational opportunity,” Vines stated. “Basically, we just wanted to listen and understand from all the different perspectives.”

Vines said his firm plans a public outreach workshop to receive more input.

Bertie County Schools Superintendent Dr. Otis Smallwood, Michael White, Curriculum Director, and Carol Mizelle also attended. The educators spoke about TGOW being a base for Bertie students of all ages to connect and engage with the outdoors.

Former NC Central University Professor and Dean, Dr. Ben Speller, spoke many times about Bertie history.

“Based on what I heard they want a recreational, educational, and performance (venue) similar to what they have in, say, Dare County at Manteo,” Speller remarked. “I told them to make certain they understand the history and culture of the area. They need things here to communicate that this is one of the earliest settlements in North America and use this as a window to what people might want to see in Bertie County and the surrounding area.”

Speller also advocated for an amphitheater and enclosed displays of historic artifacts, some of which would have been excavated from the surrounding area.

“Dream big,” Speller espoused. “You can always come back and when we do it, we need to do it right.”

Merry Hill resident Michael Freeman attended and said his dream is for free, open, public access to the water for swimming and fishing.

“We need to build on two of Bertie’s most significant assets by offering experiences that are unparalleled in the realm of historical and natural resources,” added Payne.

As the morning moved toward noon and the meeting wound down, Vines revealed a diorama display of what the project could look like and said he and his firm will be returning within the coming weeks for more research and a more detailed presentation.

“We’ve done work all over the nation,” said Vines, who is a native of Edgecombe County and a graduate of the NC State University Design School. “But there’s something refreshing about working close to home.”

Vines says he hopes to complete a phase-one comprehensive plan that will be rolled into the PARTF application the county will submit in early spring. If the full grant is secured, it would be for about \$500,000. He also has plans for one more community engagement session with the broader group of Bertie County citizens who live in the area near TGOW.