

Hilton Head Island Ethics Society
Press release
October 15, 2021

“Responsible growth means planned growth.” That message rang clear in the October 5 meeting of the Hilton Head Island Ethics Society. The topic of the meeting was the ethics of controlling Beaufort County growth, and it featured two speakers: Mr. Tim Wood, a carpenter and fine woodworker from Beaufort, and Dr. Narendra Sharma, for thirty years an economist with the World Bank and the Founder and Chair of the Neighborhood Outreach Center, a nonprofit community development organization for underserved communities with centers in Hilton Head, Bluffton, and Beaufort.

Mr. Wood pointed out that between 1974 and 2020 the population of the county grew at an average of 3,000 people per year. He asked what consensus of concern about overdevelopment now exists among residents and urged people to respond to a petition he authored, which can be accessed at <https://www.thepetitionsite.com/654/878/824/support-controlled-growth-in-beaufort-county/>. Ethically, he recommends the county concentrate on infill and open land purchases and prioritize preservation and waterway protection instead of greater residential development. Politically, because we are a democracy, he said, consensus must first be sought through a county-wide referendum on development.

Dr. Sharma spoke to the need and the means for acting collectively for the greater good of all people. Local agents of change are business, government, and the community, and all stakeholders must share “a clear vision, strong political will, consensus, action, and long-term commitment.” When the cost-of-living increases and the quality of life decreases, the motive to act becomes relevant.

As Mr. Wood said, consensus for change has to develop first, and as Dr. Sharma said, that consensus has to reflect the consequences of long-term inequities of wealth, living conditions, workforce problems, environmental deterioration and misuse of natural resources. These are problems in evidence nationally and globally as well as locally. The unsustainable status quo of ten percent of the world’s population holding forty-four percent of the world’s wealth is borne out nationally by the population of the poor equaling the population of Australia and New Zealand combined, and locally by nearly ten percent of the county’s population living in poverty while the GDP growth of Hilton Head and Bluffton rose twenty-one percent between 2015 and 2022, to \$9.9 billion.

Planned growth can be initiated locally. Mr. Wood would like to see a referendum passed that capped annual residential growth at 0.75%, placed a moratorium on condominium developments, and called for an end to large self-contained residential neighborhoods.

Dr. Sharma has long argued for an increased supply of affordable housing, improved wages for low-wage workers, and improved transportation for commuting workers, and he has identified actions that could lead to those goals. For 2022 and looking twenty-five years down the road, he recommends allocating more public lands for affordable housing, blocking conversions of low-income housing to short-term rentals, providing water and sewage for low-income mobile homes, allocating 3+ million dollars of accommodation tax funds for affordable housing, conducting rigorous environmental, social, and economic impact assessments for public sector programs, and embracing a clear vision and long-term commitment as a pathway to equitable, sustainable development.

Disseminating the practical reasoning attested to in the comments of both these speakers is intended to heighten awareness of both the problems and the prospects for growth in Beaufort County, a county that has found itself growing exponentially in the past half-century. Failure to address the ethical issues, along with socioeconomic considerations, related to population growth has already led to some short-sided decisions involving public transportation, housing, and the environment. For the economy of the county and its communities to prosper in the future, the ethical implications of decisions made both collectively and individually should not be ignored.

The Hilton Head Island Ethical Society meets six times a year to discuss relevant ethical issues, like this one. Membership is free and participants are always welcome. Further information can be found on our website, www.ethicshhi.com.