

From the Post and Courier, Charleston, SC, October 11, 2011.

# Conservation League helped clear the way for Boeing

BY CHARLES LANE

Tuesday, October 11, 2011

Given the bitter acrimony over the debt crisis, cruise ships and I-526, it seems like America and Charleston can't agree on anything. That impression is wrong, because there are more examples than not of the private sector working together to promote economic development while protecting the environment and quality of life. These efforts have received little attention, but they offer lessons that can help resolve our current disputes.

Boeing is Exhibit A. In 2004 Vought/Alenia, Boeing's supplier and predecessor in Charleston, announced plans to build a plant next to the airport to construct the fuselage for the 787 Dreamliner. The airport was the ideal location.

However, the site had extensive wetlands and it would have been impossible to construct the factory without filling 38 acres, an unusually large impact.

One of the attorneys working with the Department of Commerce on the project, John Hodge of Columbia, contacted Nancy Vinson at the Coastal Conservation League to discuss how to best move the project through the regulatory process. Time, confidentiality, certainty were important to allow the company to meet its production schedule.

John proposed that Vought/Alenia and the Department establish a mitigation fund of \$4.75 million to protect and restore critical wetlands within the Ashley River watershed. The fund, called the Ashley Cooper River Environmental Trust (ACRET), would be managed by a board of federal and state regulators and senior staff from Vought/Alenia and the Department of Commerce. Dana Beach and I represented the conservation community and Nancy served as board secretary.

Federal and state wetland permitting is critical to clean water and healthy wildlife habitat, but it can be difficult to navigate quickly. The regulatory agencies -- the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, S.C. DHEC, and S.C. DNR did an admirable job of meeting their procedural requirements while accommodating this unorthodox approach to wetland regulation.

At the same time, Vought/Alenia and the Department of Commerce were respectful of the agencies' missions and statutory guidelines.

Part of the outcome is well known. Boeing purchased the plant in 2008 and expanded it without the normal year's wait to obtain permits since the permit and wetlands mitigation were completed in anticipation of an expansion. Production has begun and the project appears to be a huge economic success, with a strong prospect that additional Boeing suppliers will locate in the region.

The conservation benefits are less well known, but equally impressive. ACRET funds were central in protecting 13,000 acres in the Ashley River Historical District, at a time when it seemed like the future of the District was residential subdivisions from one end to the other.

Besides making it possible to restore and preserve wetlands that are essential to water quality in the river, the fund helped protect the historic landscape that draws thousands of visitors to Charleston every year, a huge benefit not only for the environment, but for the regional economy as well as tourism plays a large part.

Boeing was successful because of the parties worked together calmly on creative solutions. All sides "checked their egos at the door" and focused on the larger picture. Everybody won.

The same spirit of compromise marks the latest proposal by SCANA to replace an ash landfill for their power plant near Canady's on the Edisto River.

The original proposal was to build a new landfill in Colleton County, adjacent to hunting property protected by a conservation easement. Conservationists and community members opposed the landfill and urged SCANA to consider another way to deal with the ash.

Last week The Post and Courier reported that SCANA has decided to expand the existing ash pond just across the river from the plant. This will provide enough space to store ash safely, but it will also solve another problem. SCANA intends to excavate an old storage cell and move the ash to the new state-of-the-art site.

So not only will future ash production from the plant be stored as safely as possible, potential contamination from decades of ash production will be averted.

These private companies, Vought/Alenia, Boeing and SCANA, exist to produce a solid return on investment for their stockholders.

They are also citizens in our community, with an obligation to contribute to its well-being. The resolution of these two issues shows that they don't believe the two are in conflict.

In both of these cases, working together produced the best business outcome and the best community outcome. It is regrettable that the public sector has adopted a confrontational, uncompromising position on all issues from the federal budget, I-526, and cruise ships that has led, predictably, to impasses and lawsuits.

They should take a lesson from their private- sector partners.

**Charles Lane** is broker-in-charge of Holcombe, Fair, and Lane and chairman of the ACE Basin Task Force.

Copyright © 1995 - 2011 Evening Post Publishing Co..