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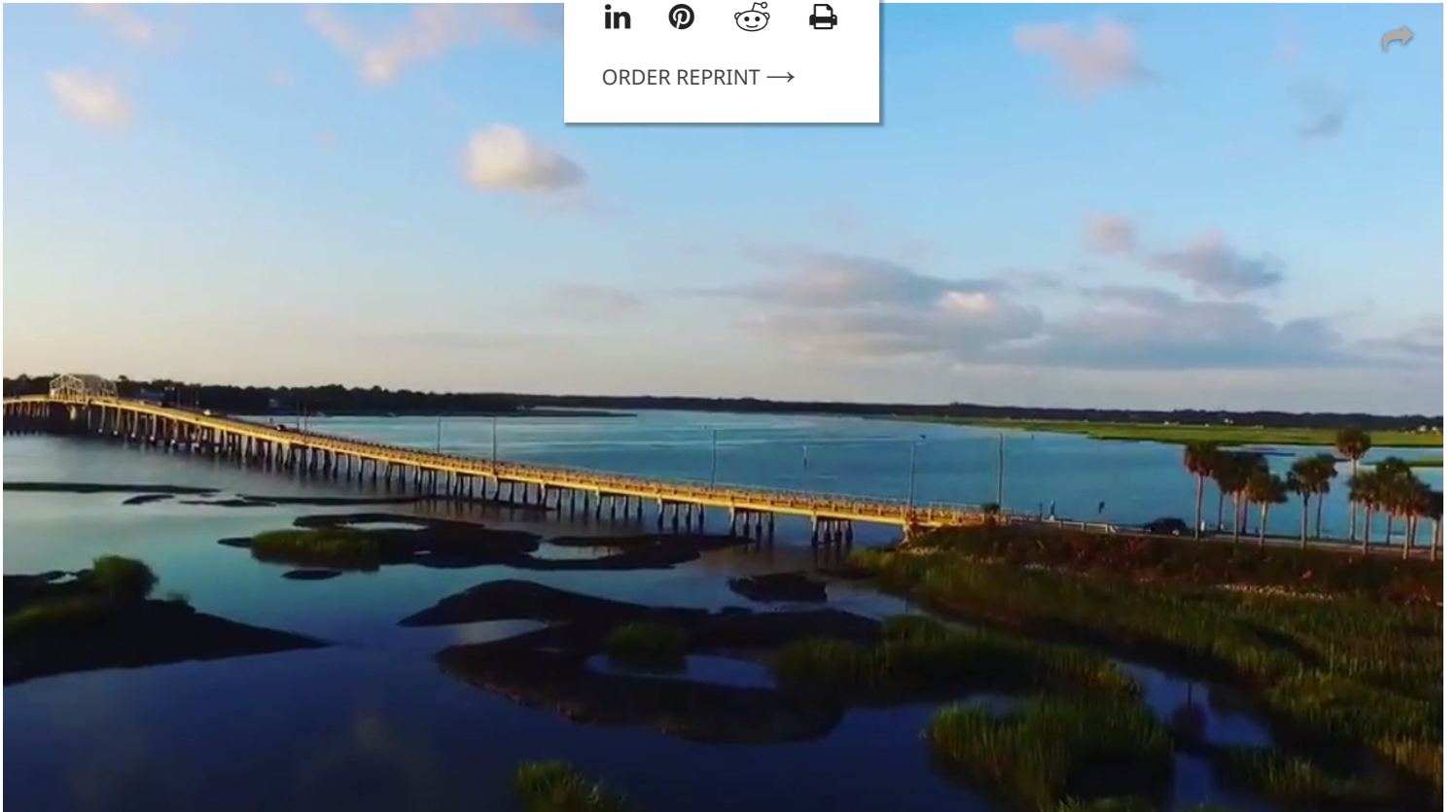
# This Beaufort County land is protected. Why Marines and conservationists are cheering

BY KARL PUCKETT

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The City of Beaufort posted this drone footage on their Facebook page with the caption, "We do live in paradise." The drone flies over the Woods Memorial Bridge and also has stunning views of the marsh. BY CITY OF BEAUFORT | SK SIGNS & DESIGNS



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The U.S. Department of Defense and Beaufort County have purchased a conservation easement on 2,068 acres near Beaufort — including several miles of waterfront in a pristine estuary — for \$5.8 million, permanently protecting the land.

The deal, described as a “statewide accomplishment,” will protect the mission of Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort, critical habitat in St. Helena Sound and the public’s enjoyment of the Wimbee River and Barnwell Creek, officials said.

The property, known as as “Oak Point,” is a peninsula on the Wimbee River in St Helena Sound with 18 miles of river frontage north of Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort. Beaufort County and the Defense Department announced the deal Friday, hailing it has the third largest property preservation in the county.

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The DOD and Beaufort County split the cost, each contributing \$2.9 million toward the purchase of the conservation easement. Beaufort County’s share came from its [Rural Critical Land Preservation Program](#). Funding for that land protection initiative comes from voter-approved bonds.

The U.S. Department of Defense and Beaufort County have purchased 2,068 acres of land at Oak Point near Beaufort for \$5.8 million. The waterfront property and the uplands will be permanently protected with a conservation a easement. *CAYLOR ROMINES*



Oak Point, she noted, is the third-largest property preserved in Beaufort County through the county's Rural and Critical Land Preservation program.

The ACE Basin is the confluence of the Ashepoo, Combahee and Edisto Rivers and contains over 316,000 acres of privately, state and federally protected land, according to the ACE Basin Task Force. Oak Point lies squarely within the ACE Basin National Estuarine Research Reserve. Water users, the task force said, can now travel from the mouth of St. Helena Sound up the Combahee River into Colleton County and traverse an entirely protected landscape.

The conservation easement has “incredible public benefit” because it preserves the waterfront in St. Helena Sound, Kristin Williams, executive director of the Open Land Trust, said in a statement.

Red shows the location of the 2,068-acre Oak Point property, purchased by Beaufort County and the Department of Defense and protected by a conservation easement. *BEAUFORT COUNTY OPEN LAND TRUST*

“Protecting Oak Point has individual value — to wildlife, water quality, fishing and recreational interests, and the military — but due to its location in the middle of a protected landscape, the public benefits are multiplied even further,” Williams said in a statement. “This conservation easement successfully adds to the ACE Basin, military readiness, and an entire landscape of protected properties around our thriving communities— forever.”

The conservation easement will be held in partnership between DOD and [Beaufort County Open Land Trust](#).

Securing the property has long been a priority for Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Beaufort because the land is off the north end of a runway.

Colonel Karl R. Arbogast, commanding officer of Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort, said preserving Oak Point protects the Air Station's military mission by ensuring unobstructed training for pilots and aircrew.

Col. Karl R. Arbogast, commanding officer of Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort, said preserving Oak Point ensures unobstructed training for pilots and aircrew *CAYLOR ROMINES*

Funding came from the county's Rural and Critical Land Preservation Program and the DOD's Readiness and Environmental Protection Initiative. MCAS Beaufort and Beaufort County have been partners on these types of projects for over 20 years. Due to that partnership, Beaufort County was able to secure the property for 45% of appraised value, the county said.

Oak Point is located between Williman Island and North Williman Island and Buzzard Island on the north and surrounded by other protected properties. Oak Point was the last unprotected property immediately adjacent to the St. Helena Sound.

Land protection efforts began over 10 years ago, restarted in earnest in 2019, and were completed in 2021, the county said.

## SECOND PURCHASE ANNOUNCED

A second purchase, this one for \$860,000, was also announced Friday, protecting an additional 24 acres on St. Helena Island. The waterfront property could easily have been developed into another gated community, "but that is not what St. Helena needs or wants," said York Glover, District 3 council member.

The property, informally known as "Bermuda Bluff," lies outside the Bermuda Bluff neighborhood. The protected property is not part of that gated community and will remain open and accessible to the public, said Chris Ophardt, a county spokesman. Beaufort County currently owns a small in-holding used by fishermen and residents who enjoy water access and the view of Parris Island and Port Royal Sound.

This story was originally published January 9, 2022 7:00 AM.

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Karl Puckett covers the city of Beaufort, town of Port Royal and other communities north of the Broad River for The Beaufort Gazette and Island Packet. The Minnesota native also has worked at newspapers in his home