

Dorchester Seniors Inc.
Governance Committee Report
July 21, 2022
Faith Sellers Senior Center
Summerville, SC

The Governance Committee met on July 21, 2022. Members present were Kathene Winston, Don Baus, Haren Main, Jay Villeponteux, Louise Carroll. Clarke Williams attended virtually. Executive Director Leigh Thomson was also present. Tim Lewis was unable to attend, but sent his comments via email and all members were provided a copy.

The meeting was called at the request of Chairman of the DSI Board, Emily Watts, to discuss the future of the two DSI Centers.

Director Thomson reported on a recent meeting she had with Jason Ward of Dorchester County. He reported that the glue seepage at the St. George Center is caused by a drainage problem. Water is not draining away from the foundation toward the detention pond, rather it is sitting there and the result is the glue seeping through the tiles. He proposed that he and Leigh meet with Mayor Kevin Hart to discuss the problem. Jason also wants Leigh to put together an RFP for remodeling the St. George Center. He said that some dollars may be coming available for remodeling, but that Council support would be required to use those dollars that way.

He continued that there are future buildings planned near the new court house and one of those might be available in the future for a new Senior Center in St. George.

It is Jason's opinion that both the St. George Center and the Summerville Center should become part of the Dorchester County Comprehensive Plan. It is unclear to Leigh and the committee what that move would do to the independence of DSI in the future.

Jason also stated that Mayor Keith Summey of North Charleston has approached him about putting a Senior Center on a two-acre plot of land near the Aquatic Center in Dorchester County. This is about five miles down the road from the North Charleston Wellness Center which is located in Charleston County. If this Center is built, would it be operated by DSI?

Leigh then reported on the status of the leases of the Saint George and Summerville Centers. The current lease between DSI and the Town of St. George is good until 2035. If DSI chose to leave that Center, a one-year notice would be required.

The current operational agreement between the County and DSI for the Summerville Center has been renewed for 20 years. However, the lease on the Summerville Center building is between Dorchester County and the Town of Summerville. The current lease expires in 2026. While no official ruling has yet been made between the County and the Town, conversations between Leigh and Jason, Jason and the Town, and Leigh and Lisa Wallace have ranged from no response to a new 20-year lease, to "not happening" on a new 10-year lease, to a "maybe" on a 7-year lease.

The next issue reviewed was capacity. Leigh reported that the St. George Center is under-used, at most there are 20 members attending daily. The Home Delivered Meal program remains robust.

The Summerville Center rooms are fully utilized in the morning. At this time fitness classes are averaging half to two-thirds full, so there is still room to add membership participation. There are rooms available in the afternoon, both large and small, but as yet there has not been the willingness on the part of the members to return for afternoon programs. The DSI management and staff are currently working on this opportunity, looking to develop afternoon or evening programs that would draw members.

The Committee then developed a PRO/CON list for each of the two Centers. The lists are as follows:

St. George

PRO

No Rent
Lease until 2035

CON

Floors seeping glue
Short Term A/C replacements needed
Low Attendance
No Room for a Wellness Center
Insufficient Parking if Attendance Grows

Summerville

PRO

Location
Parking (ok)
Meets Current Needs
Commercial Kitchen

CON

Unknown Future
No Possibility for Expansion
Some Reno is Needed/Desired
No Room for a Wellness Center

After discussing the above lists in light of the new information that Leigh presented from her conversation with Jason Ward, the Governance Committee decided that this was not the time to pursue other land/building options to replace either of the two current DSI Centers.

The lease in St. George is secure until 2035. The work that needs to be done to the floors will be discussed in the near future. Since rent is not being paid, it is within reason that maintaining the facility be done by DSI. There is a strong concern about the low attendance. While there is a new housing development to be built in St. George, the likelihood is that homebuyers would be working people with children, not seniors. There is no assurance that building a new center will cause new members to join. There is also a possibility of the County building near the Court House, and if that happens, County may make space available for a new center.

The lease in Summerville has 3-1/2 years to run. The Committee feels that the current facility is well situated and currently meets the needs. There is still capacity to expand programs, and the DSI management and staff are working on that. According to Leigh, there are no serious maintenance issues looming. What does feel critical to the Committee is to have Town Council members made aware of the support of the DSI Board and of the good work done by DSI for the Town Council constituents. Members of the Governance Committee have agreed to meet with Town Councilors. While Leigh has been working through channels to get the lease on the Town Council/County Council radar, the Committee feels strongly that a direct approach to making sure Town Council members know of the vital work done at the Faith Sellers Center, is one more approach to take in securing a new lease.

The potential of the City of North Charleston creating a new Senior Center near the Aquatic Center may be the future solution to the perceived need for a wellness center, especially if County Council agrees to participate and to have the current DSI organization run the new facility.

While the Fundraising Committee is hard at work, perhaps their efforts do not need to be in direct support of a new facility. Leigh has spoken with other non-profits and it is common practice to fundraise for the organization's mission.

In summary, at this time, with the potential of County building in St. George and North Charleston, the Committee recommends maintaining the current Centers, networking with County and Town Council, and continuing the develop programs to meet the ever-changing needs of the Seniors of Dorchester County by focusing on the work outlined in our Strategic Plan.