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## State officials promote environmental awareness, coastal issues

By WES WOLFE [wwolfe@thebrunswicknews.com](mailto:wwolfe@thebrunswicknews.com) 13 hrs ago

Lynn Smith said when she arrived in the state legislature in the mid-1990s, she learned that being good with a joke wasn't enough to grease the gears of the General Assembly, and that she needed to come back to the table with better knowledge.


"Once elected, I would constantly tell my fellow legislators at the Capitol, 'The issue I ran on, y'all, and you've got to listen to me, is you don't have to go looking for the Chattahoochee River, you can smell it. It has a foul odor,'" Smith, the state House Natural Resources and Environment Committee chairwoman, said Wednesday at the Georgia Environmental Conference on Jekyll Island. "And so, I was good — I had it down and I was telling everybody that."

In the subsequent years, Smith said she put in the work on water quality issues, serving on a number of study committees, where she and other legislators dealt with "saltwater intrusion, desalination, aquifers, trout streams" and other matters.

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"So, my role changed with the 2004 elections, because the House at that point in time — the Georgia General Assembly — turned to majority Republican," Smith said. "I had to compete with several other legislators who wanted to be chair of the House Natural Resources and Environment Committee, but I was selected chair, and one of the reasons I was selected chair is because the ones deciding this, I had been to their part of the state, I had listened to their stories and I had studied their issues."

State Public Service Commissioner Tim Echols, who also spoke Wednesday at the GEC, said it's that understanding between people that can help bring focus to environmental issues, especially on the coast.

"We have a treasure trove of barrier islands here, and the best way to get people to care about these 100 miles of coast is to bring them here," Echols said. "There's no substitute for it. To encourage them to come and vacation here, to plan their convention here, and then to plan activities for them to be able to see the treasure up close.

"Because there is no substitute for being here and seeing this. And as people comment to their state representative — as Rep. Smith is at church, or downtown, and she sees constituents and they bend her ear about something — if more and more people are talking about the same thing, that's how things move along."

Echols pointed out that a lot of the discussion of political issues is driven from national media outlets. He said people only have so much area in their lives for political considerations, and issues that may emanate from elsewhere take up space that could be occupied by issues closer to home, like the environmental health and economic viability of Georgia's coast.

"Where does Jekyll Island fit on the average person's list of concerns?" Echols said. "It's not even on there. So, you've got to get things over to that list, and the way you get things over to that list is you let them experience it, you let them think about it, you let them read something about it. It takes time, and the collaboration enables you to focus those messages."

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