

The Night Project Ballast Passed, 4–3

Full speaker dossier from the July 14, 2026 meeting — public comment, public hearing, and council deliberation on the Beaufort Rosemary gas-plant FILOT. Source: 3-part Otter transcript.

4–3

FINAL VOTE

33

PEOPLE ON RECORD

21

OPPOSED

7

SUPPORTED

9

RAISED DATA-CENTER FEAR

Beaufort Rosemary's proposed 500-megawatt gas plant sits on land adjacent to, but structurally unaffiliated with, Meridian's own Kershaw County project. For over a year, tracking it has meant pulling together whatever surfaced—Facebook threads, county agendas, screen-recorded meetings, a Change.org petition—into one place: the MRX stakeholder graph, tagged as a togglable "Ground Game" layer so it never gets confused with Meridian's own core relationships. As of tonight that layer holds 432 stakeholders (252 tagged Ground Game, 185 pre-existing core Meridian contacts), spanning 10 tracked projects, 23 logged sources, and 53 dated position records.

What Ballast means, on both sides of the fence

To the community, Ballast has become less about one power plant and more about whether Kershaw County will let outside capital treat Bethune as, in Sierra Club organizer Paul Black's words tonight, a "sacrifice zone." The specific fears are consistent across dozens of speakers over multiple meetings: air and water quality near an aquifer, property values, a company offering cash "Good Neighbor" payments that several residents read as an attempt to buy silence, and—above all—the belief that the plant itself is not the endpoint but the first domino toward an AI data center nobody has been told about. The 800-acres-optioned-versus-100-acres-needed gap is the single fact doing the most work to fuel that suspicion.

To Meridian, Ballast is not our project, but it is the clearest real-time read available on how Kershaw County actually behaves when a large energy/infrastructure deal reaches a vote: how council members weigh economic development against resident opposition, how a FILOT gets negotiated and defended, what a "Good Neighbor" misstep costs a sponsor in goodwill, and how fast a data-center suspicion can attach itself to any large power project in the county—ours included. Every position, quote, and vote in this tracker is as much a rehearsal for Dreadnaught's own reception as it is a record of someone else's fight.

Tonight: third reading passed, 4–3

The FILOT/SSRC ordinance for Beaufort Rosemary passed its third and final reading on a 4–3 vote—Chairman Ben Connell, Sammie Tucker Jr., Derek Shoemake, and Brant Tomlinson in favor; Danny Catoe, Jimmy Jones, and Russell Brazell (by phone) opposed. It was the most personally exposed the council has been on this issue: Jones disclosed a Parkinson's-related health struggle mid-remarks and read a written statement from his son opposing the project; Catoe, visibly uncomfortable with the half-mile setback, called for more transparency on future deals even as three years of family roots in the area pulled him toward sympathy for both sides; Connell defended the process itself, pointing to a December 2025 site visit—something, he said, this council had never done before for an economic development matter—and six-plus months of direct expert access for members, arguing nobody tonight had grounds to be surprised.

Twenty-eight residents, advocates, and officials spoke across public comment and the public hearing. Twenty-one opposed, seven supported or leaned supportive, and nine independently raised the data-center fear—including Brazell himself, from the dais, as part of his no vote. The full record of who said what is below, as quick reference, not folded into this narrative: distance to the site, whether they cited real expertise or were repeating what they'd heard, whether they'd spoken before, and what specifically they were angry, scared, or hopeful about.

What's still open

The xlsx tracker merge from yesterday's session, a landowner-within-2.5-mile layer with a distance-to-nearest-data-hall calculator, the social platform sweep beyond Facebook/YouTube, and a pass through the Otter ecosystem to identify which consultants

belong in the graph are all queued but not started. None of it changes tonight's outcome; it's what the tracker still owes for the next round.

QUICK REFERENCE — FULL SPEAKER RECORD

Public Comment 18 speakers, general topics

First 43 minutes of the meeting. Anyone could sign up; most spoke on Project Ballast, two spoke on unrelated county business.

John B. Burns

SKEPTICAL

Distance unknown · background: chemical/oil & gas industry (site characterization, lease negotiation)

WHY Technical due-diligence questions — grid interconnection, transmission capacity, comprehensive-plan fit.

CITED Real professional background, not Googled. No story told.

tone Measured, procedural — not scared or angry.

Data-center fear

Ran out of time, cut off

Russell Horton

SUPPORT

On/adjacent to site · family landowner, land under option to sell

WHY His and his father's land is the sale — frames it as months of hard family deliberation.

STORY Yes — the decision process with his father.

CITED Nothing external; personal stake only.

tone Calm, confident.

Spoke twice (comment + hearing)

Donnie Catoe

SUPPORT

Distance not given · not the councilman (different person, same surname family)

WHY Wanted to correct what he sees as fear-based misinformation about particulates.

CITED Explicitly says "you Google it up" — self-admitted casual research, not expert background.

tone Confident, argumentative — not scared.

Robbie Brown

OPPOSE

Distance unknown · disabled veteran

WHY Liability — who pays when residents get sick later.

STORY His own VA disability rating from burn-pit exposure (Iraq/Afghanistan) as a lived analogy.

CITED Personal/military experience, not a study.

tone Pointed, confrontational questions — not visibly scared.

Lynn Conto

OPPOSE

"4 minutes from town, 2.5 minutes from City Hall"

WHY Health & water risk to the whole county, not just Bethune.

Shelly King

OPPOSE

226 Bethune Road (address given)

WHY Feels deceived; nephew's family bought a house near the site not knowing.

CITED Oil and Gas Watch, EPA/Pipeline Safety Trust danger-zone classifications, specific water-use figures (28,000 gal/MWh; Colleton plant's 1.3B gal/month). Real technical depth, not casual searching.

TONE Urgent but composed.

Spoke twice (cut off in comment, full in hearing)

STORY Family land since the 1700s (King of England grant); father was a timber caretaker.

CITED None — pure family narrative.

TONE Aggrieved, cut off by the clock mid-sentence.

Lori Curley

OPPOSE

~700 ft from her nearest neighbor, <1/4 mile from plant

WHY Property value, foster/adopted kids, retired parents she planned to bring here.

CITED None — personal appeal ("I beg you, please, please vote no").

TONE Pleading, financially anxious.

"Melinda Davis Rykbost"

OPPOSE

Tentative ID — announced as "Brian Reichboast" (ASR error) · registered nurse

WHY Son was in the NICU for respiratory distress at birth.

STORY Yes — the NICU experience, now a 5-month-old.

CITED Merriam-Webster's definition of "bribe" applied to the Good Neighbor Agreement; her own Change.org petition (508 signatures).

TONE Controlled but clearly emotional subject matter.

Austin Thomas Rykbost

OPPOSE

Distance unknown

WHY Agricultural/soil and water-table degradation chain.

CITED "All of this information is sourced directly from the EPA" — detailed, methodical (soil acidification → aluminum toxicity → fish gill damage). Real research effort.

TONE Analytical, not emotional.

Denise Gainey Rollings

OPPOSE

Family farm/backyard, exact distance unstated

WHY 100+ years of family land, gardens, grandchildren; disclosed a seizure disorder (service dog present).

STORY Extensive — googling "NIMBY" after someone used it against her, family gatherings, sunsets, "our backyard does matter."

CITED None — narrative appeal. Repeat speaker from the prior meeting.

TONE Hurt more than angry.

Zakiya Mickle

OPPOSE

SC NAACP Environmental & Climate Justice Chair (statewide, not a Bethune resident)

WHY Environmental-justice framing — who bears the health cost vs. who benefits.

Dana Pierce

N/A

Off-topic — convenience center hours, not Ballast

Moved from suburban New Orleans in 2012; supports the new ID-check policy. Not part of the gas-plant record.

CITED EPA, 1–60 mile downwind pollutant-drift range. Real subject-matter credential, not casual.

tone Advocacy-professional, pointed rhetorical questions.

Data-center fear

"I'm left to assume this methane gas plant will likely power a data center."

Eve Carlin

N/A

Off-topic — hate crimes ordinance petition, not Ballast

Rep. for Kershaw NAACP / Dem Party / Dem Women — following up on a 600+ signature petition from 5/12/26, asking council to act within 30 days.

Public Hearing — Item 7D

15 signed up, Project Ballast FILOT

Longer format (up to 10 min each). Several public-comment speakers returned here for their full remarks.

Emily Poole

OPPOSE

Staff attorney, SC Environmental Law Project — non-resident advocate

WHY The FILOT math specifically, plus statutory cost-benefit requirements.

CITED SC FILOT statute, EPA COBRA cost model, environmental-justice percentile screening, Spartanburg Valera Data Center precedent by name. Legal-brief level rigor — real expertise.

tone Calm, thorough, no emotional appeal.

Data-center fear

"Under normal taxation, this project would generate about \$14 million per year. Under this FILOT, it drops to merely \$2 million."

Samantha Melamed

OPPOSE

Aiken, SC — drove 1.5 hrs, non-resident

WHY Fought a nearly identical gas-plant proposal on her own 6th-gen family farm.

STORY Extensive — being approached, elderly neighbors targeted, Aiken's comprehensive-plan fight.

CITED PhD geneticist, 30 years lung-cancer research (explicitly not speaking in that professional capacity, but has it); cites the "get power, then lock community support" AI-datacenter developer playbook from industry conferences. Strong real background.

tone Urgent, credible, not scared for herself — warning them.

Data-center fear (most detailed)

Sarah Williams

OPPOSE

Distance unstated

WHY Good Neighbor payments as "buying support."

CITED No formal sources — rhetorical/persuasive framing.

TONE Frustrated, indignant.

Data-center fear

"I also believe this power plant is the first step toward a data center or worse, depending on the wind."

Linda Kanetzer

OPPOSE

States she doesn't live in/near Bethune

WHY Corporate opacity — alleges BR NGE is a 3-person family operation with a Scotland-based affiliate.

CITED Own informal digging ("that's what I've been able to gather"), not a study.

TONE Suspicious/investigative, not angry.

Gracie Kane

MIXED / PRO-PROCESS

Lives on Holton Farms (Prestage-owned), near the site · age 24

WHY Wants the decision made on rigorous evidence, not fear; personally favors "responsible economic development."

STORY Longest speech of the night — moved from Raleigh, married 2 months ago, and was harassed: people photographed her home after she spoke in support on Facebook.

CITED Her own direct email correspondence with BR's VP of Development (primary source) — and explicitly critiques other speakers' sources as misapplied (a 4x-larger plant, a non-peer-reviewed student paper).

TONE Analytical, turns visibly hurt describing the harassment.

Harassed after speaking

Only speaker who audits others' citations

Jim Curley

OPPOSE

22-year Bethune resident

WHY 35 days of his own research and outreach to council.

STORY Why he and his wife chose Bethune; "my lettuce, my zucchinis breathing it in."

CITED Comparable plants in Colleton, Gaston SC, Wisconsin, Virginia — real cross-referencing effort.

TONE Firm, resigned, thanks council members individually by name.

Amy McCaskill

OPPOSE

Uncle lives "less than a mile, if not a half mile" from site

WHY Read the Coastal Conservation League's formal opposition letter into the record, then added personal remarks.

Adam Smith

OPPOSE

~2 miles from site · 3rd-gen cattle farmer

WHY Drought/well-water anxiety; distrust of "growth" as a goal in itself.

STORY Worries about showing up to find the cattle troughs empty.

CITED Statewide nonprofit's position + EPA COBRA cost estimate (\$1.5–3.3M in added healthcare costs). Strong organizational-level citation.

TONE Formal reading nested inside 87-year-old-uncle-never-notified personal frustration.

Notification gap (uncle never contacted)

CITED None formal — philosophical argument ("growth unchecked...has a name: cancer").

TONE Measured, cynical about council's incentives, not angry.

Data-center fear

"More housing, solar farms, or heaven forbid, a data center."

Paul Black

OPPOSE

Kershaw Co. resident (~3.5 yrs) & Sierra Club senior campaign organizer

WHY Coined the "sacrifice zone" framing for Bethune.

STORY A community odor issue his own council member personally resolved.

CITED Utility integrated resource plans (professionally reviews these) — real, applicable expertise.

TONE Articulate, apologizes for running long, ultimately urgent.

Data-center fear

Cites the Spartanburg/Valera Data Center bait-and-switch by name as the template to fear.

Cody Mitchell

NEUTRAL / CONCERNED

SC House Representative, district covering N. Kershaw Co.

WHY Represents constituent concern without personally taking a side on the plant itself.

CITED None formal — found out via Facebook like his constituents did, which he flags as backwards.

TONE Diplomatic, explicitly declines to fault the landowner, council, or developer.

Data-center fear (implied)

"What you hear here is what's next. Well, none of us know. That's the concern."

Gina Korn Knight

OPPOSE

Distance unstated · grandson present

WHY Property-law framing — the "no harm rule."

CITED Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health study (2021), named specifically. Credible, specific citation.

TONE Measured, principled, not scared or angry.

Tom Webb III (2nd appearance)

OPPOSE

—

Brief repeat: distrust of the company's motives, "something ain't right."

Data-center fear

Ben Connell (Chairman) YES

The field-trip point: Connell said council took a site visit in December 2025 to see a comparable 500-megawatt plant — something, he said explicitly, this council had never done before for an economic-development matter — specifically so members would have a real basis to judge the project. He noted members had direct cell-phone access to company experts for 6+ months, far earlier than the usual point in the process. His point: given that runway, nobody tonight should be surprised.

Research he shared: corn irrigation (13 acres = ~120,000 gal/day) vs. the plant's requested cap (130–150,000 gal/day); his own propane/gas-stove PM2.5 exposure research; SC's energy mix (~50%+ nuclear, ~30%+ gas, ~10% coal/biomass phasing out, ~3% hydro, ~1% solar); a vision for routing FILOT revenue into Bethune via state grant-matching (streetscape, playground, business grants).

Derek Shoemake YES

Made the motion. Lives near his own "sewer plant, chemical plant, and landfill" in Bethune — framed as proof he isn't asking others to bear something he wouldn't. Cited EPA data that home wood-burning and gas stoves emit more national PM2.5 than the entire gas power sector. Directly addressed Gracie Kane being "booed," praised her. Argued that refusing all growth (residential, industrial, commercial) leaves "a place nobody wants to do business."

Brant Tomlinson YES

Personally toured Dominion's comparable Columbia Energy Center plant in Gaston, SC, and asked staff directly whether they'd had resident complaints about noise/environment — answer was no, despite dense development a quarter-mile away. Has an outstanding callback owed to a "Miss Baldwin." Thanked the NAACP and Aiken speakers by reference.

Sammie Tucker, Jr. YES

Cited a specific Alabama precedent: a gas plant built there was eventually sold to the local utility, stayed a plant, never became a data center. Asked Beaufort Rosemary directly to extend Good Neighbor offers to *everyone* in the potential pathway, not just those already contacted. Framed the FILOT as the alternative to "if you have zero [incentive], you get zero [revenue]."

Danny Catoe NO

Deep personal roots in the area (generations in law enforcement, grist/flour mills). Explicit discomfort with the half-mile setback — used a walking-track analogy (two quarter-mile tracks =

half mile) to argue "that's not very far." Called for more transparency on future projects. Said plainly he doesn't fully believe either side's claims about health risk.

Jimmy Jones NO

Disclosed a Parkinson's-related health struggle mid-remarks, apologizing for needing to pause. Read a written statement from his son Taylor, who lives in Cleveland, OH, opposing the project on his behalf. Delivered detailed personal research on data-center water use, electromagnetic field exposure, and utility-bill impact — reads like his own research memo. Closed: "I'm one of the ones that plead with y'all. No."

Russell Brazell (remote, by phone) NO

Asked pointed process questions: where does the power actually go, does it lower local rates, and — directly — "are we conclusive that a data center would not own our property?" (Answer from the chair: it would require a new zoning/planning-commission action.) Voted no citing no clearly identified benefit to Kershaw ratepayers specifically.

Cross-Cutting Threads

The jobs number is contested

Opponents repeatedly cite **15 permanent jobs** (Poole, Mickle, Parkins, and implicitly Williams) as disproportionate to a \$900M investment and a ~85% property-tax discount. Councilman Shoemake, arguing in favor, cited "**20 to 25**" instead — then pivoted to defend the project on tax-base/schools grounds rather than job count, effectively conceding the headcount is small either way.

What actually made people angry at the sponsor

- The "Good Neighbor Agreement" cash payments (\$10k/yr × 20 yrs to some residents) — called "bribery" (Rykboost, via Merriam-Webster's definition), "organized crime" (Webb, via a lawyer friend), and "poisons the well" (Black).
- Uneven outreach: some in the pipeline corridor got Good Neighbor contact; others — McCaskill's 87-year-old uncle, residents at Timrod/Boise Cascade — got nothing. Even Councilman Tucker flagged this and asked BR to fix it going forward.
- The 800-acres-optioned vs. ~100-acres-used gap, never fully explained — the single biggest driver of the data-center suspicion below.
- Kanetzer's allegation that the BR entity is effectively a 3-person family operation.

- No public disclosure yet of water source/volume specifics (flagged by Poole, Black, and Parkins independently).

Who was surprised, and who says no one should have been

Several speakers describe being blindsided: Shelly King's nephew bought a house near the site not knowing; McCaskill's uncle and the whole northern stretch of Timrod Road got zero notice; even **state representative Cody Mitchell** says he found out via Facebook, "instead of me informing my constituents." The "35 days" (or 30/40/60 depending on the speaker) since this became public is a repeated refrain.

Connell's direct rebuttal (see his card above): the council itself had 6+ months of expert access and ran an unprecedented December 2025 site visit — his argument is that the process was diligent even if individual residents felt rushed. The transcript doesn't resolve this tension; it's a real disconnect between council-level and resident-level notice.

"Next thing you know, it's a data center" — who said it, and why

Nine people raised this independently, including one sitting council member (Brazell) who cited it as part of his no vote. The reasoning clusters into three arguments:

- **The acreage math** (Parkins, Ruth's math, Ruth-cited Capital News stat): 800 acres optioned, only ~100 needed for the plant — "there's more to come."
- **Industry precedent** (Poole, Black, Melamed): the Spartanburg/Valera Data Center FILOT was approved without disclosing it would become a data center, then expanded 9x after the fact — cited by name as the template to fear.
- **General distrust of "growth"** (Webb, Adam Smith, Burns, Zakiya Mickle, Mitchell): less evidentiary, more a gut read that a 500MW plant this size doesn't match stated local demand, so something else must be the real customer.

Nobody presented direct evidence a data center is planned — it's treated across all nine as a self-evidently bad, likely-next outcome rather than an argued conclusion.

Annotated screenshots

Checked the otter-export-20260714_210622806200/ folder and the top-level meeting-transcripts folder — no annotated/circled screenshots there, just the 3 you already had (2 GIS parcel maps, 1 live-stream start frame). You mentioned circling the speaking member on some screenshots with text — if they're on the Desktop or elsewhere, point me at the folder and I'll match them to speakers above.

v1 • 2026-07-15 — first versioned release. Merges the 7/14/26 Ground Game overview report with the 7/14/26 meeting speaker dossier. Also saved to Supabase (mrx_bethune project, public.project_notes, title "Kershaw Ground Game Report v1") for durable retrieval.

Built from the 3-part Otter transcript (Kershaw.County.Council-Meeting Pt. 1/2/3, 7-14-26). "Cited" assessments reflect what each speaker said about their own sourcing, not independent fact-checking. No one in the transcript is described as crying — tone read from word choice and delivery only, not visual/audio cues.

● Support ● Oppose ● Mixed ● Off-topic / N/A