

Subject: Pennies of Preservation
February 2, 2023

We went to St. Simons Island this past weekend. When I visit other communities, I'm always looking for new ideas and how other towns address common municipal problems. As I have mused in the past, communities on the Golden Isle of Georgia have much in common with Highlands. These coastal towns, like St. Simons, are surrounded by a unique ecological environment of the vast marshlands and tidal estuaries. To Georgia's credit, they have worked to preserve these unique spaces while promoting some tourism and development. Highlands, located on this high and narrow plateau, has faced the same challenges.

Like so many visitors Sallie and I love to come to the Georgia coast to see and partake in its natural beauty and wildlife. The folks of coastal Georgia are keenly aware that marshlands cannot be lost to overdevelopment. Such development would jeopardize the fishing and shrimp industry as well as impact tourism.

On the Highlands Plateau, we also have a unique space and place. There are plant and animal species here that are not found in other places. We can't afford to compromise this natural realm for over-development and short-term financial gain, by a few. If we destroy what we have, it does not come back. We could face paraphrasing Milton, a paradise lost.

So, Sallie and I were having lunch at a nice restaurant in St. Simons. While waiting for our orders, I noticed a brochure on the table. It was called Pennies for Preservation. I read it.

Pennies of Preservation is a program that the St. Simons Land Trust developed in 2017. The brochure clearly stated that 25 cents would be added to our bill. That quarter would go to the St. Simons Land Trust for preserving valuable land on the island. This program involving participating restaurants is not mandatory. Any customer can request the 25 cents to be removed from their bill. It is a voluntary program that needs no ordinances or state-enabling legislation.

I suspect the restaurants don't encounter too many cheapskates ne'er do wells that protest the extra 25 cents. It is too little of a cost, preserving such a critical environment, to make a complaint, I should think.

He is my idea; folks in Highlands could implement such a preservation program. With the influx of tourists and visitors who frequent our restaurants, a modest program of 25 cents on every bill could impact preservation and conservation efforts on the plateau. A 50-cent or dollar contribution might even be more in line with dining costs in Highlands.

The funds from this voluntary program could be directed toward the Highlands Land Trust or the Highlands Biological Station. The Highlands Land Trust could apply the funds toward acquiring additional property or for maintaining the property that they currently hold in trust. The Highlands Biological Station and its foundation could use the funds to support research efforts on the Highlands Plateau. There may be other applications for the funds that I am not currently aware of or considered.

I am making this proposal for the preservation of the Highlands Plateau environment. What intrigues me about such a program is that it would be community driven and not mandated by any government agency. Let's give it a thought and let me know what you think.