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cultural resourcesnext

Steward and Advance Kiawah’s Cultural, Historical, and Community Excellence

Cultural Resources

Considers historic buildings and structures, commercial districts, residential districts, unique, natural, or scenic resources, archaeological, and other cultural resources.

Big Ideas

*Kiawah Island Historical Society
Community Center*

Objectives

CR1 - Cultivate and refine cultural programming and services for residents and guests.

CR2 - Preserve and showcase Kiawah’s rich history and natural heritage.

CR3 - Support a Performing Arts organization to enhance cultural offerings on Kiawah Island.

Overview

This section explores Kiawah Island’s rich cultural tapestry, from its indigenous origins through colonial times to its evolution as a premier coastal community. It examines historical preservation opportunities, including the potential Kiawah Island Historic Society, while highlighting the Arts and Cultural Events Council’s programming, Art Guild exhibitions, and Freshfields events.

Kiawah’s recreational offerings are detailed—nature programs, the Sandcastle, tennis, and environmental education—alongside its golf and community outreach through the Town’s Charitable Contributions program and “Kiawah Cares.”

Finally, the section addresses a significant gap in community infrastructure—the absence of public facilities and gathering spaces outside the gate—and explores the potential for a dedicated Town community facility to enhance inclusivity and connectivity. Through this comprehensive examination of cultural resources, the element sets forth the objective of preserving and enhancing Kiawah’s unique heritage and community life for future generations.

Cultural History

Kiawah Island's rich heritage spans centuries, from its early inhabitants to its present-day status as a premier coastal community. The island is named after the Kiawah Native Americans, who were its original stewards before English settlers arrived in 1670.

The colonial era began when John Stanyarne acquired Kiawah in two halves in 1717 and 1737. Stanyarne, a prominent planter, established a thriving plantation, setting the stage for Kiawah's agricultural legacy. This legacy continued under the stewardship of the Vanderhorst family, who maintained the plantation until the Civil War.

The Civil War marked a significant turning point for Kiawah. As the Vanderhorst family sought refuge elsewhere, the island became home to formerly enslaved individuals, many of whom had worked the land under the previous system. The post-war Reconstruction era brought complex changes to Kiawah's social and economic landscape.

When the Vanderhorsts returned, they adapted their agricultural practices to new realities. During this period, Quash Stevens, a former slave and son of the plantation's previous owner, assumed a managerial role. His position exemplified the evolving social dynamics of the time.

The mid-20th century heralded a new chapter for Kiawah. In 1950, C.C. Royal of Aiken purchased the land for logging and timber production, shifting away from agriculture. The first summer homes, built along Eugenia Avenue in 1954, marked the beginning of Kiawah's transformation into a residential destination.

A pivotal moment came in 1974 when the Kuwait Investment Corporation acquired the island, setting in motion its development as a world-class resort. The opening of the Kiawah Island Resort in 1976, complete with its inn, amenities, and golf course,

established the foundation for Kiawah's current reputation.

Today, Kiawah Island is a testament to thoughtful development while providing an unparalleled living experience. The island's journey reflects the Lowcountry's broader narrative, making Kiawah a place of natural beauty and significant historical interest.

Kiawah Island Historic Society

The Town should consider creating the Kiawah Island Historic Society (KIHS), an organization that would be responsible for establishing listings for historic and archaeological resources on the National Register of Historic Places. Currently, only two Kiawah Island properties are listed: the Arnoldus Vanderhorst House, added in 1973, and the Bass Pond Site, designated in 1979.

The establishment of KIHS presents an opportunity for the Town to preserve and promote its cultural heritage. Through this organization, the Town can identify, document, and protect historically significant sites while engaging residents and visitors in the island's history. This initiative would safeguard important cultural resources and deepen the community's understanding of Kiawah's unique historical significance in the Lowcountry region.

The Bass Pond site, located near what is now Rhett's Bluff, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places because it is a prehistoric "shell midden area." A midden is a mound of domestic waste/refuse containing shells, animal bones, and cultural materials marking the site of a prehistoric settlement. The Bass Pond site is the only midden not affected by natural erosion and is crucially significant to understanding indigenous human cultural processes during the Formative Period.

Arts and Cultural Activities and Events

Kiawah Island boasts a carefully curated cultural programming calendar reflecting its status as a premier coastal community. The island's commitment to artistic excellence is evident in the caliber of events hosted throughout the year.

Established in 2004, the Town of Kiawah Island-funded Arts and Cultural Events Council has been instrumental in elevating Kiawah's cultural landscape. This committee oversees diverse programming designed to engage a wide range of interests. Events span from casual piano bars at the Sandcastle to intimate concerts featuring world-renowned artists and prestigious institutions like the Charleston Symphony Orchestra.

The Art Guild of the Kiawah Island Community Association hosts the annual Art Guild Members Show and Sale. This event showcases the talents of Kiawah's resident artists, featuring original paintings, photographs, handcrafted pottery, wooden items, jewelry, and home decorations. The show provides an opportunity for the community to appreciate and purchase locally created art in a welcoming island setting.

Freshfields Village, one of Kiawah Island's central gathering places, hosts over 60 events annually. These include open-air concerts, film screenings, and festivals celebrating local arts and culture. The village's annual art walk features artwork and live jazz performances, offering refined entertainment for residents and visitors.

Performing Arts Center

The vision for a performing arts center on Kiawah Island emerged from a recognized need to enhance and properly house the Town's robust cultural programming. Through its Arts and Cultural Events program, the Town of Kiawah Island has demonstrated a strong

commitment to bringing high-quality artistic performances to the community. However, despite having the resources and ability to attract prominent performers, the program has faced persistent challenges due to lacking a dedicated, professional-grade venue.

Recognizing this limitation, in August 2022, the Town Council took a structured approach by issuing a Request for Proposals (RFP) for a comprehensive feasibility study. The study's scope included market analysis, operational assessments, financial projections, and examination of potential partnerships. Webb Management, in collaboration with Theatre Consultants Collaborative, conducted the study, which was completed in September 2023.

The feasibility study revealed strong market potential and high user demand for a performing arts facility. The proposed center was envisioned as a multi-use facility featuring

After carefully reviewing the study's findings, the Town Council made a strategic decision not to pursue the establishment of a municipal facility at that time. Instead, they determined that a separate 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization would be better positioned to develop and operate the center, with the potential for Town support in the future.

This decision has led to the creation of the Lowcountry Arts Center, an independent nonprofit organization. While still in its early stages, the organization has established its board of directors and begun its developmental work. The Town maintains interest in potentially supporting this initiative through various means. Possible forms of support could include assistance with funding opportunities, site selection, and program development.

Recreational and Educational Activities

Kiawah Island provides diverse recreational and educational opportunities. Its beaches, bike paths, and maritime forests offer settings for various outdoor activities.

The Kiawah Island Nature Program offers guided experiences that showcase the island's ecosystem. Activities include kayaking excursions and birding walks, which provide encounters with Kiawah's natural environment.

The Sandcastle, an oceanfront facility for Kiawah property owners, offers fitness classes, aquatic programs, and enrichment activities. It hosts lectures and workshops by experts, catering to owners' interests.

Kiawah offers opportunities for water activities including stand-up paddleboarding and fishing. The Kiawah Island Golf Resort provides instruction and guided excursions for various skill levels.

The Roy Barth Tennis Center offers high-quality facilities and coaching. Ranked among top tennis resorts globally, it provides an excellent environment for players to improve and enjoy the sport.

The Kiawah Conservancy contributes significantly to environmental stewardship and education on the island. It engages residents in conservation efforts and enhances their understanding of Kiawah's ecosystems through nature walks, workshops on native flora, and citizen science initiatives.

Premiere Golf Culture

Kiawah Island's golf offerings represent the pinnacle of the sport, cementing the island's reputation as a world-class golf destination. With five exceptional courses on Kiawah and two off-island, each offering unique challenges and breathtaking coastal vistas, Kiawah provides an unparalleled experience for golf enthusiasts.

The crown jewel of Kiawah's golf portfolio is The Ocean Course. Designed by the legendary Pete Dye, this masterpiece has hosted multiple major championships, including the 1991 Ryder Cup and PGA Championships in 2012 and 2021. The 2031 PGA Tour Championship will again be held on this elite course.

Complementing The Ocean Course are equally impressive designs by golf's most respected architects. Jack Nicklaus's Turtle Point offers a more traditional layout with precision-demanding fairways and greens. Tom Fazio's Osprey Point weaves through Kiawah's maritime forests and saltwater marshes, blending strategic challenges with natural beauty. Gary Player's redesigned Cougar Point provides spectacular vistas of the Kiawah River and surrounding marshlands.

Off-island but nearby, Oak Point, located in Kiawah River Estates, rounds out the golfing experience. Originally conceived by Clyde Johnston, this course sits by the Kiawah River and Haulover Creek.

Members of the Kiawah Island Club have access to two additional world-class courses. Tom Watson's Cassique offers a links-style experience reminiscent of Scotland and Ireland's finest courses, while Tom Fazio's River Course meanders along the Kiawah River and Bass Pond, providing a stunning backdrop for golf.

Kiawah's commitment to golfing excellence extends beyond the courses themselves. A state-of-the-art Golf Learning Center offers cutting-edge technology and instruction from top professionals, allowing golfers to refine their skills in a premier setting. Multiple tournaments and events foster a vibrant golfing community among the island's residents and guests.

All Kiawah Island Golf Resort courses are certified as Audubon Cooperative Sanctuaries, demonstrating the island's dedication to environmental stewardship alongside golfing excellence. This commitment ensures that Kiawah's golf experiences are world-class and sustainable, preserving the island's natural beauty for future generations.

Community Outreach

Kiawah Island's community culture embodies a deep commitment to philanthropic engagement and regional stewardship. This cultural value manifests through the active participation of residents and organizations in initiatives that create meaningful impact across the sea islands and broader Lowcountry region, reflecting the community's dedication to preserving and enriching the area's cultural fabric.

The Town of Kiawah Island's Charitable Contributions program stands as a cornerstone of these efforts. This initiative thoughtfully allocates town financial resources annually to support non-profit organizations serving the sea islands. By focusing on critical areas such as health and wellness, hunger relief, and housing stability, the Town demonstrates its dedication to addressing pressing social issues in a targeted and impactful manner.

The Kiawah Island Community Association's "Kiawah Cares" initiative connects residents with non-profit organizations in the Johns and Wadmalaw Islands. This initiative facilitates meaningful community engagement and support for neighboring communities through volunteer opportunities, fundraising events, and educational programs.

Through these refined and strategic outreach efforts, Kiawah Island demonstrates that true community leadership extends beyond geographical boundaries. By engaging thoughtfully with its neighbors, Kiawah enhances the quality of life for those in need and enriches its community, creating a legacy of responsible stewardship that benefits the entire region.

Community Gathering Space

Kiawah Island currently faces a significant gap in its community infrastructure: the absence of truly public facilities and gathering spaces outside the gate. While the island offers impressive amenities, they exist primarily behind gates with restricted

access:

- Club members enjoy exclusive facilities
- KICA members (property owners) have access to dedicated amenities
- Resort guests utilize the Resort's public amenities

This access structure leaves the Town of Kiawah Island without dedicated public spaces that are freely accessible. The current arrangement creates several challenges for community cohesion and public engagement:

- Limited opportunities for inclusive community gatherings that bring together residents from different parts of the island
- Restricted access for visitors hoping to experience Kiawah's cultural offerings and community spirit
- Reduced public programming options for Town-sponsored events and cultural initiatives
- Fewer spaces for spontaneous community connection and relationship building among diverse island stakeholders

A dedicated Town community facility would address these needs by providing an accessible gathering space for residents, property owners, and visitors. Such a space could serve multiple functions: hosting community events, supporting cultural programming, facilitating educational activities, and acting as a welcoming hub for civic engagement and social interaction.

As Kiawah continues to evolve, establishing a public gathering space represents an important step toward creating a more inclusive, connected, and vibrant community beyond the gates. This facility would complement existing private amenities while filling a crucial gap in Kiawah's public infrastructure, helping build a more cohesive community identity encompassing all who live, visit, and invest in Kiawah Island's future.



cultural resources objectives and strategies

GOAL:

Preserve and enhance Kiawah’s distinctive culture, traditions, and heritage.

Objective CR1

Cultivate and refine cultural programming and services for residents and guests.

Strategy CR1.1

Curate a selection of high-quality cultural offerings that align with the interests of Kiawah’s residents and visitors.

- Partner with renowned artists, performers, and lecturers to bring exclusive cultural experiences to the island.
- Develop a year-round calendar of events that balances traditional favorites with carefully selected new offerings.

Strategy CR1.2

Coordinate with other public and private organizations to encourage further development of arts and cultural activities.

- Promote available events and programs for the benefit of Kiawah residents and visitors.

Objective CR2

Preserve and showcase Kiawah’s rich history and natural heritage.

Strategy CR2.1

Create a Kiawah Island Historic Society

- Provide resources for the KIHS to conduct thorough research on Kiawah’s history, from indigenous inhabitants to present day.

- Promote the identification and preservation of archaeological and historic resources located on Kiawah Island.

Objective CR3

Support a Performing Arts organization to enhance cultural offerings on Kiawah Island.

Strategy CR3.1

Explore a formal partnership with the Lowcountry (Kiawah) Performing Arts Center.

- Develop a memorandum of understanding outlining the scope of support and collaboration.
- Consider designating a town liaison to facilitate communication and coordination with the organization.

Strategy CR3.2

Consider providing resources and support to help establish and grow a Performing Arts center and program on Kiawah Island.

- Explore opportunities for financial support through grants or dedicated funding.
- Assist if needed in identifying and securing suitable location to house the new venue.

Objective CR4

Establish a dedicated public community gathering space outside the gate to enhance inclusivity and connectivity.

Strategy CR4.1

Develop a plan for a multi-purpose community center that supports diverse programming.

- Consider spaces for cultural events, educational activities, and community gatherings.
- Ensure design accommodates flexible use to maximize community benefit.

Strategy CR4.2

Identify sustainable funding sources for development and ongoing operations.

- Explore municipal funding options including GO Bonds and Accommodation Tax revenue.
- Investigate grant opportunities to supplement Town funding.
- Develop operational budget and long-term maintenance plan.

Strategy CR4.3

Establish collaborative programming partnerships with existing Kiawah organizations.

- Coordinate with the Arts and Cultural Events Council for cultural programming.
- Partner with the Kiawah Conservancy, as an example for environmental education initiatives.

- Implement targeted outreach to Kiawah groups, and neighboring communities including Seabrook and Johns Island to promote facility awareness and participation.