

The Post and Courier

THE SOUTH'S OLDEST DAILY NEWSPAPER

September 2, 2006 • Charleston • North Charleston, S.C.

SATURDAY

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Briefly



Moo Roo business sold to investment firm

The Charleston business specializing in luxury evening bags will keep its corporate headquarters in the Holy City, but will undergo a name change and offer an expanded merchandise line. **7B**

With candidates, kin are just part of the package

Embarrassing photos of newsmakers' children doing unwise things are nothing new. But, the networking habits of young people have become the Internet version of the dreaded supermarket tabloid. **12A**

Hurricane expert Gray trims storm forecast

Colorado State University's Bill Gray now calls for 13 named storms instead of the 15 he predicted in early August or the 17 he foresaw at the start of the hurricane season. One of Gray's team offered a number of possibilities for why the season has been so quiet. **3A**

Mexico's President Fox won't address Congress

President Vicente Fox's office said he would give a televised speech to the nation rather than deliver his state-of-the-nation report to Congress after leftist lawmakers seized control of the stage in a crisis stemming from the disputed July 2 presidential race. **3A**



Coming Sunday

FALL ARTS EVENTS: Get a rundown of the Low-country's top attractions. **Arts & Travel**



Today's outlook
Sunny and warm.
High 88. Low 73.
Complete 5-day forecast, **12B**.

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3 charged as Spann's family grieves

BY NITA BIRMINGHAM AND EDWARD C. FENNELL
The Post and Courier

LINCOLNVILLE — Sterling "Sterlo" Spann was a 19-year-old living the dream of performing, writing and producing rap music from a makeshift studio in his home.

His violent death Thursday night played out like the lyrics he set to beats.

Spann and a friend were shot when they walked into a home-invasion robbery at 200 W. Stall St. Neighbors who usually watch television at 6 p.m. were horrified to see Spann dragged to the front yard, flung to the ground and shot. He died shortly afterward at Trident Medical

Center.

His friend, Jamie Williams, 20, was shot three times and managed to stumble to the nearby Lincolnville fire station. His condition was stable Friday, a Trident spokeswoman said.

The woman who lives at 200 W. Stall St., Patricia Ann Green, later told a neighbor that she was asleep when three strangers kicked in her front door and demanded money. They put duct tape on her mouth and wrapped tape around her hands and legs.

"I just want to know why. They beat me crazy with a gun and I want justice," Green said Friday afternoon during a

Please see **SHOOTING**, Page 6A



Katrina Spann collapses in grief Friday outside the bond hearing for a suspect in the slaying of her brother Sterling Spann. Leo C. Gadsden was one of three men arrested Thursday. Victim's advocate Easter LaRoche (right) helps to comfort Spann.

ALAN HAWES/STAFF

Time shares

No matter how you slice them ...



... buyers pay a price

BY KYLE STOCK
The Post and Courier

Cecil Sprung and his wife had heard horror stories about time shares. And as retirees, they have to be careful with their finances.

So when they decided to attend a sales pitch for a Myrtle Beach resort in exchange for a free weekend stay, they promised themselves that they wouldn't buy anything. But the units were beautiful, the management seemed "on the up and up," and the credit card came out "in the excitement of the moment."

"For whatever reason, our eyes were clouded at the time," Sprung explained.

What is a time share?

Time shares are residences sold off in chunks of time, so that a buyer owns a fraction — such as one week — of a development, rather than buying an entire home, apartment or condo. Buyers may get a deed or just a contractual right to use the property for a week or two a year. They are sold in the following three ways:

FIXED WEEK: Buyer occupies a

The couple has owned its time share for about 18 months. Every time they try to reserve it, they are told it is not available. Usually their requests are met with

specific unit during a specific week or weeks every year.

FLOATING WEEK: Buyer occupies a specific type of unit for a set amount of time within a certain season or defined window of time each year.

POINTS: Buyer uses a prescribed amount of points — or timeshare currency — to book any unit in any of the seller's resorts at any time of year.

a follow-up call offering to rent them a nearby unit for the price of an upscale hotel. Eventually, the couple was told that reservations should be made 13

months in advance.

"That was what really laid us low," Sprung said. "I don't even know if I'll be living in a year."

Time shares offer average vacationers four walls and a roof in places where even upper-middle-class families can't afford a second home. But many are losing sleep over these American-dream vacations.

Complaints from scores of time share owners much less diplomatic than the Sprungs pile up at Better Business Bureaus, in state consumer affairs departments and on Internet message boards. Lawsuits from aggrieved time

Please see **BUYERS**, Page 9A

A LITTLE PIECE OF HEAVEN OR THE INVESTMENT FROM HELL?

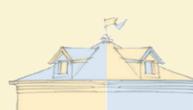
TODAY

Business is booming in the industry, especially in S.C., the No. 2 time share state.



SUNDAY

You get what you pay for, but what exactly are you paying for with a time share?



MONDAY

South Carolina's consumer protection system is failing time share buyers.

Widow to receive \$200,000 in Santee Cooper settlement

BY RON MENCHACA AND KYLE STOCK
The Post and Courier

Santee Cooper has agreed to pay \$200,000 to the widow of a plant operator who died while working at the utility's Moncks Corner water-treatment plant almost six years ago, just hours after he was exposed to a toxic ammonia gas leak.

Officials at the state-owned utility have steadfastly maintained that Thomas A. Moore, then 33, died of natural causes, citing autopsy findings that linked his death to a suspected heart abnormality. But a growing panel of medical experts and physicians who have studied the case say that Moore did not



Moore

have a heart defect and that he likely died of exposure to a highly concentrated form of ammonia gas that was used at the plant to treat drinking water.

Co-workers discovered Moore's body on the morning of Oct. 16, 2000. Near his body lay a plant logbook in which Moore had recorded an anhydrous ammonia leak the day before he died. Plant officials dismissed the leak as a harmless

Please see **MOORE**, Page 8A

Preventing Iraqi civil war is main U.S. mission, Pentagon report says

BY ANN SCOTT TYSON
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Preventing civil war is now the most urgent mission of the growing contingent of U.S. troops in Iraq as rising sectarian bloodshed has pushed violence to its highest level in more than two years, according to a new Pentagon report released Friday.

The report, though consistent with what news media have reported for months, is significant because it represents an official acknowledgment of trends that are widely believed to be driving the country toward full-scale civil war.

"It's a pretty sober report this time," said Peter Rodman, assistant secretary

of defense for international security affairs. "The last quarter ... it's been rough, and the levels of violence are up and the sectarian quality of the violence is particularly acute and disturbing," he said.

The report described a rising tide of sectarian violence, fed in part by interference from neighboring Iran and Syria and driven by a "vocal minority" of religious extremists who oppose the idea of a democratic Iraq.

Executions, kidnappings and other sectarian attacks targeting Iraqi civilians have soared over the past four months, contributing to a 51 percent rise in casualties among the

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FROM 1A

Time share buyers across nation paying the price

BUYERS From Page 1A

share owners stack up on court dockets, including at least seven accusing a Hilton Head developer, Trew Holdings LLC, of deceptive sales tactics.

Three other suits charge one of the largest players in the industry, Wyndham Worldwide Corp., with unfairly manipulating its reservation systems to lock buyers out. Wyndham owns Fairfield Inc., a major developer, and RCI LLC, one of the industry's leading exchange companies.

These companies contend that they did not do anything wrong and say their contracts detail what buyers agreed to.

Many of the problems can be traced to South Carolina, which trails only Florida in the number of time shares available, but only one person assigned to regulate the industry.

When asked about recent complaints, time share companies and the American Resort Development Association, the industry's trade group, point to booming sales figures and millions of ostensibly satisfied owners.

They also note that many of the trade's biggest problems come from customers who did not read their contracts or properly research the product. Time share buyers need to be educated about what they purchased and how to use it, they said. Most agree that illegal sales pitches are still a problem, but one that taints a small percentage of all transactions.

Customer-service rankings of time share companies are hard to find, but based on lawsuits and complaints to the Better Business Bureau, questionable sales tactics seem to be far less common at high-end developers such as Marriott International Inc. and Walt Disney Co.

Part of the problem at more criticized companies is popularity — the story of a booming industry fueled by unchecked demand. Sales surged along with more conventional real estate deals in recent years, even though banks won't write mortgages on time shares and the value plummets as soon as they are purchased.

In the frenzy, some consumers fail to ask the right questions and thoroughly research the product. And some developers don't have much incentive to play it straight. As long as the buildings and amenities are beautiful, people will buy.

Time share laws in South Carolina and many other states do little to ensure that buyers can make reservations, avoid rapidly increasing fees or guard against properties falling into disrepair.

Most of the latest problems with time shares ripened over the last decade as the industry made a wholesale shift from selling

BY THE NUMBERS

130

Time share resorts located in South Carolina

3.9M

Number of U.S. households that own a time share

\$7.9B

Profit the time share industry reported in 2004

\$15,789

Average sale price of a time share unit

7.8%

Of all U.S. time shares are in South Carolina

\$479

Average annual maintenance fee on a time share unit

18,561

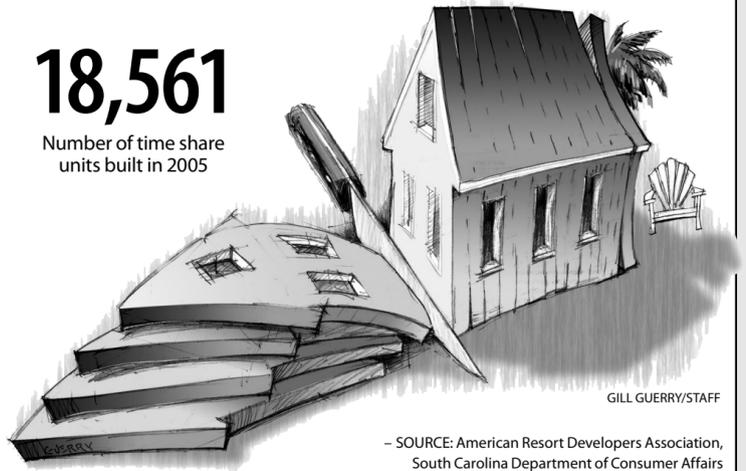
Number of time share units built in 2005

135

Time share complaints fielded by the S.C. Department of Consumer Affairs in the past three years

12.3%

Portion of time share units that are rented overnight by non-owners



GILL GUERRY/STAFF

— SOURCE: American Resort Developers Association, South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs

fixed-weeks to hawking "points." The public got wise to the fact that time shares quickly depreciated in value, so developers started marketing the idea of buying a vacation, rather than a specific unit in a specific property at a specific time each year.

With points, buyers were promised flexibility and choice — a set amount of time at any one of a staggering number of alluring resorts. People who owned fixed-week time shares were offered baskets of points to surrender their reserved time and join the system. And developers dispatched sales teams to each property to sell existing owners more points, even if that particular development was sold out.

But points aren't wood and nails; they are simply "symbolic of buyer's property interest," according to the wording in time share contracts. And the pools of points grew so quickly that it became hard for consumers and regulators to track and understand the reservation systems. As

time share companies merged and consolidated, different baskets of points were combined, creating more confusion.

A number of owners and consumer advocates now are accusing some time share giants of overselling their properties to the point that it is impossible for all owners to exercise their rights to a reservation. The practice is common in the airline industry, where carriers sell more fares than available seats, on the presumption that some passengers won't show up.

While airlines are permitted to oversell their product, time share developers are not. The federal government, however, does not regulate the time share industry even though many developers have resorts scattered across the country. And South Carolina officials have not done thorough audits of companies that sell points to see if they have enough units to accommodate all of the booking currency they have sold.

A time share saleswoman at a Myrtle Beach property told a re-

porter for The Post and Courier, who went in as a member of the public, that if he bought a certain chunk of points, he would receive a deed to a new resort under construction down the road. She assured him that he would have top priority in reserving a unit in the building she was sitting in. "This resort has been sold out for years," she explained.

When asked what would happen when all of the deeds to the new resort were gone, she replied: "Hopefully, by then they'll be building another, or I'll be looking for a job."

Even time shares with good customer-service records can cost buyers more than they bargained for. Sales representatives rarely include expensive financing and maintenance, assessment and exchange fees in the listed price of a

unit. Once those costs are factored in, a time share can be almost twice as expensive as comparable stays at a nearby hotel, according to a Post and Courier analysis.

The Sprungs' trip to Myrtle Beach was not their first experience with time shares. In 1975 they bought a unit in Pennsylvania, near their former New Jersey home. That one allowed years of vacations with their two daughters, and they were able to trade it for stays abroad. The couple sold it in the late-1980s for about a third of what they paid for it, a price that they were happy with considering they had used the place for some 15 years.

The Sprungs are now ready, after about 18 months, to cut their losses on their latest time share. The couple conceded that all their problems could probably have

been deduced by reading the two-inch sheaf of documents that was handed to them during the sales pitch that day in Myrtle Beach. But they didn't interrupt the parade of the sales staff long enough to read the fine print. Now they have only a piece of paper to show for their \$8,000. The piece of paper says it is "symbolic of buyer's property interest," but provides no guarantee that the Sprungs will be able to make a reservation. The couple also has forked out another \$650 in unsuccessful attempts to sell their time share.

"We could have gone to a lot of nice places with that money," Cecil Sprung said. "I knew better. But at the moment, it just seemed like a great idea."

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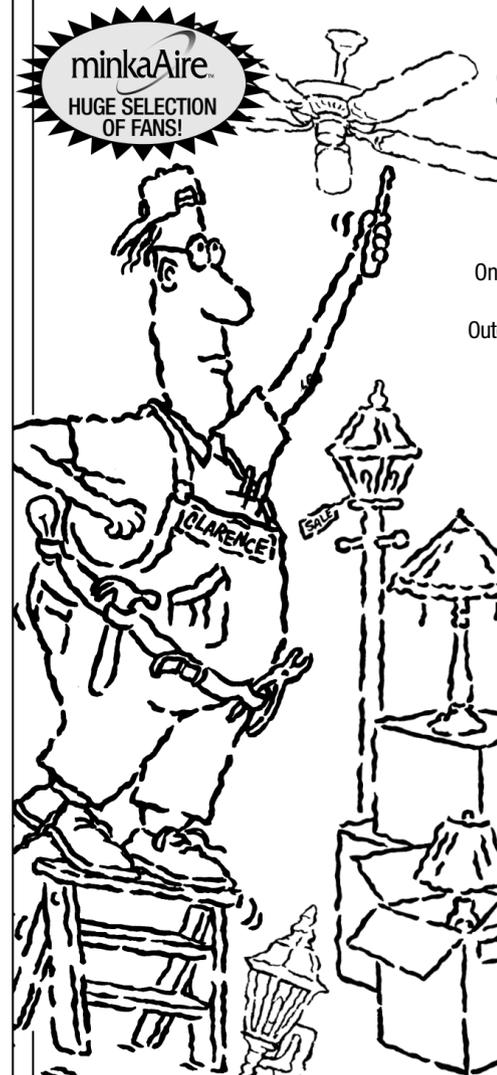


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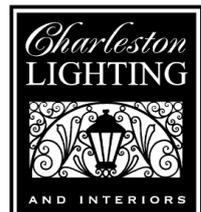
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Tigers pass season's first test in commanding style



Citadel finds Texas A&M too much to handle



Charleston Southern puts dent in Presbyterian streak

Charleston native Art Shell is back on the sidelines in silver and black. **Sports, 1C**



The Post and Courier

THE SOUTH'S OLDEST DAILY NEWSPAPER

September 3, 2006 • Charleston • North Charleston, S.C.

SUNDAY

Founded 1803 ★★ \$1.50

Briefly

County set to spend \$34 million on park sites

Charleston County's Park and Recreation Commission plans to spend its share of the half-cent sales tax on large, undeveloped tracts of land for regional parks but also is interested in sites that could be used for boat landings, beach access or bike paths. **1B**

Lowcountry arts scene on cutting edge

The local scene has become stronger and better organized, while directors and venues have favored more avant-garde fare. And as a result, the 2006-07 arts season features an array of innovative dance, music, and theater. **11**



Northwood Assembly nurtures new churches

It's a story that is familiar to members of Northwood Assembly in North Charleston: A member feels called to start a new congregation, the member founds the church, and the church succeeds. **1H**

SPA expansion remains adrift in sea of red tape

When the State Ports Authority shifted its plans for a new container terminal from Daniel Island to North Charleston in 2003, the agency viewed the permits as a slam dunk. But now, more than three years later, the project is still treading water. **1F**



Lowcountry is going — and growing — bananas

There are more than 50 varieties of banana trees, most of which grow in humid, tropical areas. The Lowcountry is humid enough, but not quite tropical, so why are they growing so well here this year? **1E**



Today's outlook
An afternoon t-storm in spots. High 90. Low 71. 5-day forecast, **14B**.

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Setting the record straight **2A**

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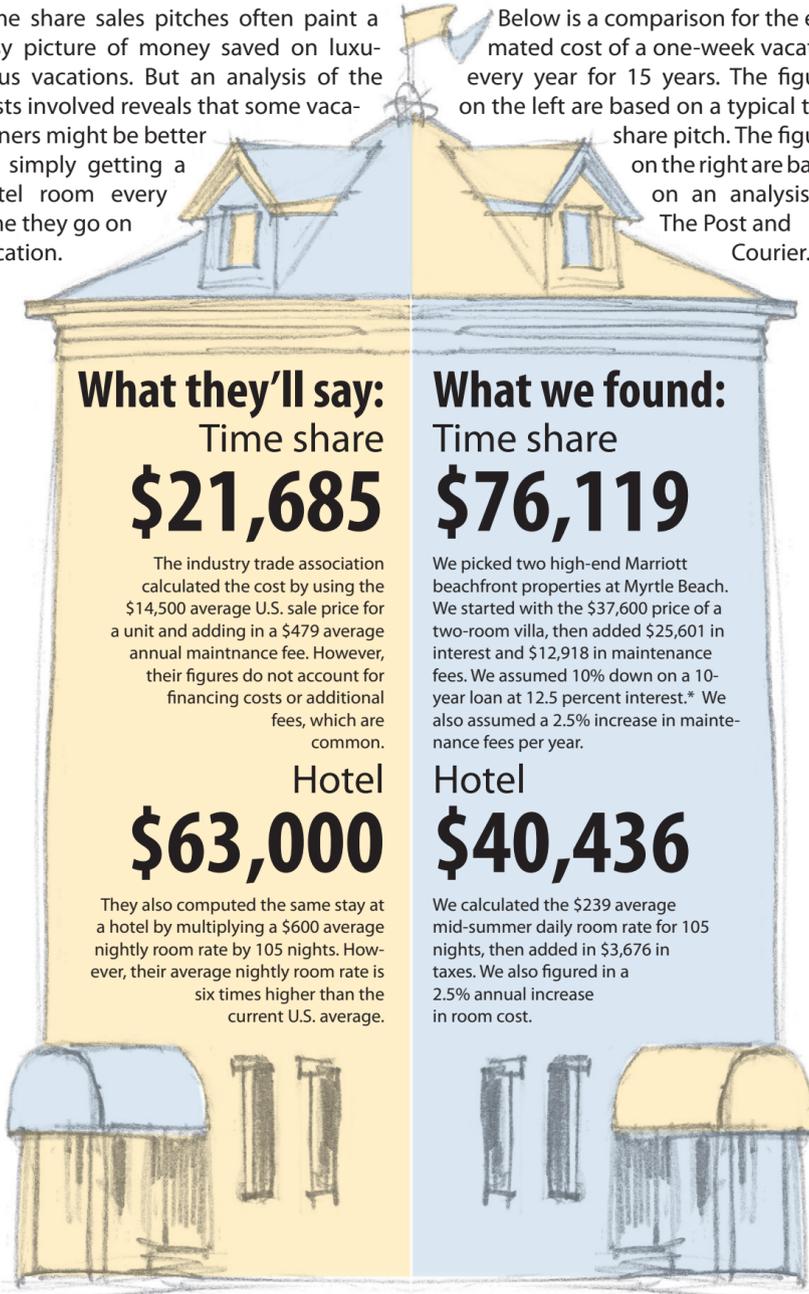
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A LITTLE PIECE OF HEAVEN OR THE INVESTMENT FROM HELL?

Time share sales pitches often paint a rosy picture of money saved on luxurious vacations. But an analysis of the costs involved reveals that some vacationers might be better off simply getting a hotel room every time they go on vacation.

Below is a comparison for the estimated cost of a one-week vacation every year for 15 years. The figures on the left are based on a typical time share pitch. The figures on the right are based on an analysis by The Post and Courier.



*The average rate at which the company has lent money in recent years
SOURCES: American Resort Development Association, Marriott International Inc.

GILL GUERRY/STAFF

Time share ownership comes with problems

Buyers pay more than they bargained for

BY KYLE STOCK
The Post and Courier

Lawmakers have chased away most of the con men who roamed the time share industry in its early days three decades ago. But in their place, Corporate America has swallowed the market and filled it with fine print.

Much of the industry is now a well-oiled machine that often nicks consumers at every level of purchasing, owning and getting rid of a time share. Unsuspecting buyers face:

- ▶ High-pressure sales tactics
- ▶ Expensive financing
- ▶ Convoluted reservation systems
- ▶ Volatile and steep annual fees and questionable management
- ▶ A dismal resale market in which owners virtually must give away their units in order to get rid of them.

Pitches and promises

Helen Allston does not have the luxury of luxury. The 56-year-old Summerville resident has been on disability from her job at the Postal Service since her car was rear-ended



SATURDAY

Business is booming, especially in S.C., the No. 2 time share state.

TODAY

You get what you pay for, but what exactly are you paying for with a time share?

MONDAY

S.C.'s consumer protection system is failing buyers.

promises, which were exactly what she heard when her boyfriend wrangled her into a time share sales pitch on Edisto Beach in 1998.

"I had no intention of buying them and I told him so," Allston said. "I watch my money. ... I wouldn't spend this much on something like this."

The salesman, however, sensed that the boyfriend was won over and attacked Allston's skepticism. He said he was disgusted that the pair would even think of turning him down after he offered up confidential information, Allston recalled.

"He was actually making me feel like dirt for not wanting it," she said.

The guilt tactic worked and the couple paid \$3,600 before leaving the office that day — most of which went directly into the pocket of that salesman and his on-site managers, according to other time share salesmen interviewed for this article.

Time share promoters have to abide by strict state rules these days. They are not allowed to pitch units as an

Please see **TIME SHARE**, Page 6A

Election margins razor-thin

Nation appears weary of GOP, but wary of Democratic alternative

BY DAVID ESPO
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Call it the campaign with no margin for Republican error, in a nation that is war-weary and eager for change, yet seems wary of the Democrats.

Even Republicans tacitly concede they will lose seats in both the House and Senate in Nov. 7 elections midway through President Bush's second term. Yet Democrats, long out of power, are loath to predict publicly they will gain the six Senate and 15 House seats they need for control of Congress.

Voters like Jim Meyer are part of the reason one party is scuffling, yet the other not completely confident.

"I think we're in a lot of trouble," said the 59-year-old resident of Greenhills, Ohio, a Bush voter in 2004. His reasons: "Our commitment overseas, using our National Guard as much as we're using it, calling back our troops" to duty.

Still, he sized up the political alternative in less-than-glowing terms. "I think a lot of Democrats come across as crazies."

It's an impression Democrats are determined to negate — and Republicans eager to reinforce — in the 10 weeks from the traditional Labor Day campaign kickoff until Election Day. In all, 33 Senate seats, the entire 435-member House, 36 governorships and hundreds of ballot questions will go before the voters.

Polls show the war in Iraq is unpopular, Bush's public support is lagging, and

Analysis



Election '06

Please see **ELECTION**, Page 9A

A smoking gun of a study shows flux in nicotine

BY BRIAN HICKS
The Post and Courier

It's the kind of news that makes you think you need a smoke.

A new study says tobacco companies have jacked up the nicotine in cigarettes by at least 10 percent in the past few years, theoretically making it even harder to stop smoking.

Standing outside his Folly Beach liquor store, Bubba Seal takes a drag on his Marlboro as he considers this. He's just heard that higher nicotine can even affect veteran smokers, making them dizzy — giving them headaches — if they go more than an hour without a puff.

"It doesn't affect me," he says finally. "I don't go that long."

Around Charleston, smokers are utterly

Please see **SMOKING**, Page 9A

By the numbers

A study by the Massachusetts Department of Health found that the amount of nicotine delivered per cigarette rose 9.9 percent — from 1.72 milligrams to 1.89.

The study found 92 of 116 brands had higher nicotine yields in 2004 than 1998. Fifty-two of those had increases of more than 10 percent.

The study says Doral Lights had 36 percent more nicotine than in past years, while Kool Lights had 30 percent more.

Marlboro products had 12 percent more nicotine in 2004 than 1998.

— SOURCE: The Washington Post

FROM 1A



ALAN HAWES/STAFF

Milton Terre holds a bag of information provided to him by Fairfield Inc., a time share company that he has been having problems with. Terre said buyers need to "play the system" to use a time share.

With time shares, buyers need to read fine print

TIME SHARE From Page 1A

investment or discuss their possible resale value. They are not allowed to tell potential buyers that the properties can be rented for income.

But sales offices are pressure-cookers and most time share owners interviewed for this article said the salespeople they dealt with either broke the rules or came close to illegal territory.

Meredith Exum, a Fairfield saleswoman at the SeaWatch Plantation resort in Myrtle Beach, skillfully stayed within the rules when responding to a Post and Courier reporter who inquired as a member of the public a few weeks ago: "We're not licensed Realtors, so I can't tell you anything about selling or renting them," she said. "Now, do I have owners that do both of those things? Yes. I'm not going to lie to you."

Another Myrtle Beach time share salesman, who asked to remain unnamed to avoid retribution from his employer, said good salespeople can earn between \$90,000 and \$120,000 a year along the Grand Strand. Top sales promoters on Hilton Head Island regularly gross more than \$200,000, he said.

Between 2000 and 2004, 14 percent of time share revenue went to paying sales commissions, according to a March report analyzing the industry by PricewaterhouseCoopers, a New York-based auditor.

"Honestly, a salesman is probably going to tell you anything that works, because it's commission," the Myrtle Beach salesman explained. "And they'll finance anybody. They don't give a crap if they have credit or not."

Since the start of 2005, at least six lawsuits have been filed against Hilton Head-based Trew Holdings LLC, alleging that the company's salesmen lied while pitching time shares at its Coral Sands resort, one of four time share properties the company owns on the island.

Archie Elliott, a former salesman, detailed the deception in November for a lawsuit filed by 66 owners, testifying in a sworn affidavit that the staff knowingly promised to rent the units for would-be buyers, buy them back if they ever wanted to sell and grant an extra week's stay, even though none of those provisions were offered in the contract.

Trew Holdings' defense attorney

Time share tips

It is best to proceed cautiously when buying a time share. Here are some important steps before signing the dotted line.

- ▶ Be proactive. Research where you want to buy, how much you can spend and what ownership arrangement would be best.
- ▶ Examine alternatives in the same area such as condo and home rentals.
- ▶ See how much units in your resort of choice are selling for on the resale market.
- ▶ Check for complaints about the developer at the state Real Estate Commission, the Better Business Bureau, the attorney general's office and the Federal Trade Commission.
- ▶ Find out if the developer has any financial interest in managing the property and ask if the unit has a cap on maintenance and assessment fees.
- ▶ Ask for a copy of the current maintenance budget for the property.
- ▶ Don't buckle to pressure; take a few days to think about the offer and read the paperwork carefully outside of the sales office.
- ▶ Consider having an attorney read over the contract.
- ▶ Talk to guests at the resort and see what other time share owners have to say on message boards like www.tug2.net.
- ▶ If you decide to rescind your purchase, cancel your contract in writing and send the letter by certified mail, return receipt requested.

SOURCE: Federal Trade Commission

Major players in the time share industry

Wyndham Worldwide Corp.	17,000 units	140 properties
Marriott International Inc.	10,334 units	52 properties
Sunterra Corp.	7,030 units	59 properties
Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide Inc.	6,000 units	19 properties
Hilton Hotels Corp.	4,272 units	40 properties
Bluegreen Corp.	3,141 units	21 properties
Walt Disney Co.	2,400 units	7 properties

did not return phone calls for this article.

The S.C. Real Estate Commission, which regulates more time share resorts than any state but Florida, has received about 60 complaints about Trew Holdings' properties in the past five years. Most of the gripes involved sales tactics similar to those outlined in lawsuits.

John R. Pitts, Jr., the commission's administrator, acknowledged that misleading sales pitches are a problem industrywide, although the state fields few complaints about some of the biggest players in the market.

"What (buyers) are told verbally and what's in the contract often are two different things," Pitts said. "I would love it if this article would warn the consumer to read the contract before buying, don't just take someone's word on it."

Illegal sales pitches, he added, are particularly hard to prosecute, because they usually pit the buyer's word against the seller's. The contract, which many consumers don't look at closely, often has a disclaimer that says buyers should not "rely upon representations other than those" on the paper in front of them.

Giving, then taking

Once time share companies win a sale, they immediately pitch an-

other product that will pad their books: expensive loans.

Banks won't lend consumers money for time share purchases, because the value of the unit — what they would receive in the event of default — is usually much lower than the loan amount.

Banks do, however, lend time share companies money. Time shares then turn around and lend that money to buyers at much higher interest rates.

In the past five years, 67 percent of time share buyers financed their acquisition through the same company that sold them their units, according to PricewaterhouseCoopers. Those loans, on average, carried interest rates 8.2 percentage points higher than the U.S. prime rate. Right now, that's almost 17 percent.

Bluegreen Corp., which sells the Lodge Alley Inn, one of two Charleston time shares, loaned money at almost 15 percent interest on average last year, according to the company's filings with the Securities Exchange Commission.

That rate was too high for a lot of those buyers; 6 percent of Bluegreen customers did not make their payment, comprising \$28 million in would-be revenue. Lisa Thornhill, a spokeswoman for the company, said that was not an "alarmingly high" figure

relative to the number of Bluegreen owners.

The points system

Milton Terre, a retired Air Force flight engineer from Goose Creek, loved time shares. He and his wife spent about \$80,000 on the five units they bought since 1979.

"It just fit us to a 'T,'" Terre said of their first time share. "Neither one of us like hotels. And we were looking for someplace we could relax and cook our own meals."

But the Miltons' time share honeymoon is over. These days Terre is having trouble reserving units, even though he has spent thousands of dollars to get preferred booking status.

"Used to be, whenever I wanted to go, I had time, but since 1999, it's been a problem," he said.

Terre and other time share critics attribute much of their problems to the points system, which most of the industry's major players adopted in the last decade. Developers scrapped fixed-week time shares — in which owners buy the rights to stay in the same unit for the same time period every year — in favor of a system similar to frequent-flier miles.

A certain number of points garners a deed, but buyers use the points to bid on reservations at any of a given company's resorts. The system promises buyers a best-of-

properties to rent to guests who don't pay monthly maintenance and upkeep bills as the Dillardards and other owners do.

Wyndham declined to answer questions about the lawsuit, although it pointed out that a Florida judge denied the plaintiffs' bid for class-action status.

"Fairfield has vigorously defended this case since the beginning and we are extremely satisfied with the fact that the Court, on every occasion, has ruled in our favor," the company said in a written statement.

Wyndham spokeswoman Lisa Burby also declined to answer questions relating to similar complaints from Charleston-area customers who were not involved in the lawsuit.

"There are more than 750,000 people in our company — in our company's portfolio — and the people you're talking to are just not a very large sample compared to that," Burby said.

At any given time, 12.3 percent of the people staying in a time share have not bought a unit, but are simply renting them like a hotel room, according to the American Resort Development Association, a time share industry trade group.

Two lawsuits were filed in March against RCI, a company that facilitates time share owners swapping their units. Plaintiffs in those cases allege that RCI takes a large percentage of time shares from the owner-exchange pool and rents them to the general public or grants them to its employees.

RCI declined to answer questions for this article, citing a policy of not commenting on pending litigation.

The South Carolina Real Estate Commission said it often fields complaints from people with reservation problems. Ken Kitts, the agency's time share coordinator, said consumers are struggling with increasingly complex booking rules and procedures. "Those people who call me and are happy with time shares, seem to have a magic way of making reservations," he said.

Terre, the one-time Goose Creek time share fan, had that magic touch for awhile. He would call the resorts late at night or early in the morning. If he was unable to reserve the days or the units he wanted, he would simply call again

Please see TIME SHARE, Page 7A

Web site becomes dumping ground for disgruntled owners

BY KYLE STOCK
The Post and Courier

It does not take much digging in the time share industry to find someone who's at wits' end.

Houston attorney Kurt Brown realized this a few years ago when he was trying to get a client out of a time share contract. He threw up a Web site and created the

Timeshare Dump, a place where exasperated owners could get rid of their burden. Brown did not pay for the units; his big offer was simply to accept them free of charge.

The Dump filled quickly with buyers trying to escape spiking fees and unscrupulous resale firms. It was worth cutting their losses completely if they could keep their credit clean. Brown won't say how

On the Web

timeshare.qcommerce.com/

many time shares he now owns, but he has all but stopped accepting them.

"It's the whole mixture," he said. "It's people who have gotten into serious financial problems. It's people who have inherited it and not known they could

disclaim it without accepting it. It's people who have split up with their girlfriend or boyfriend."

Brown's intent was to compile enough units so that he and his wife could retire and travel nonstop. But as the Dump got full, he started renting and reselling the time shares.

"If we get a sale, it's usually for hundreds of dollars, not thousands," he said.

Brown often advises those fed up time share owners to file a quit claim deed, which turns the property back to the developer. But the time share companies often don't even want their product back.

"They want to collect those payments, because they're at a high interest rate," Brown explained. And just because they found one fool that will buy it, doesn't mean they'll find another one."

FROM 1A

Time share prices immediately plummet on the resale market

TIME SHARE From Page 6A

and talk to a different agent.

"It was a little bit of a hassle, but you learn how to do it," Terre said. "You learn how to play the system, and that's what it is, playing the system."

But after almost three decades as a time share owner, Terre recently reached his breaking point. He was sitting in the indoor pool of a Myrtle Beach resort when pieces of the ceiling fell in the water around him. A few months later, after checking into a brand new Myrtle Beach resort, the keys didn't work and the appliances were so noisy that he couldn't talk on the phone.

"I'm just thoroughly disgusted with all of it," Terre said. "I'm not going to buy any more points and I wouldn't recommend them to anyone."

Terre also said most of the people he talks to at time share resorts feel the same way and want out.

When asked about customers having trouble booking, timeshare developers and the industry trade group invariably blame the problems on misinformed customers, not complicated booking systems or oversold resorts.

Thornhill, with Bluegreen, said learning how to use a time share is a big education process. "We do our best to work with customers," she said. "But a lot of times they don't understand the legal obligations that they sign and read."

Skyrocketing fees

Reservation or no reservation, time share owners get billed regularly, coughing up fees to pay for maintenance and occasional refurbishments. These charges generally run between \$150 and \$1,000 a year and can add up to the original sales price of a unit over 10 or 15 years.

A lot of buyers fall behind on these payments. In 2004, the average week of time share ownership cost \$479 in annual maintenance fees, according to an industry trade group. The March study by Price-waterhouseCoopers said some 7.4 percent of time share owners were delinquent in paying those fees.

In addition to sales revenue and high-interest loans, many devel-



George McMaster, a Columbia-based attorney and part-owner of the Church Street Inn time share, looks around the "finishing room" where salesmen pitch nearby units. McMaster said time shares are "the future of vacationing," but acknowledged the industry still has some problems. He currently is handling a number of lawsuits accusing a Hilton Head developer of lying to buyers.

MELISSA HANELINE/STAFF

opers collect a steady stream of recurring fees by managing the resorts that they built, a practice that has sparked criticism. Their employees often dominate the ownership committees that set the annual charges and hire contractors. Some publicly traded time share companies highlight these arrangements in filings with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

Byron Wiegand, a former time share developer who owns California-based Timeshare Resale Alliance, said this is a "total conflict of interest" that is gouging consumers.

"You've got the weasel in charge of the henhouse," he said. "And they're just fee-ing them to death... stuffing the money in their pockets as fast as they can."

Individual buyers own such a minuscule portion of a resort that

How do points work?

Time share buyers used to get four walls and a roof for a week. Now, most get thousands of "points," that they use to bid on reservations at a number of resorts. Points function as a sort of currency in the time share market, similar to frequent-flier miles.

How many points are required to make a reservation varies by the location of the resort, size of the unit requested, length of the stay and time of year. For instance, a person who buys 100,000 points to reserve a mid-summer week in Myrtle Beach, might also use the points to garner two weeks or a bigger unit at the same resort in mid-winter.

they often don't bother exercising their voting rights. Once developers are in charge, Wiegand said, problems often start. Fees go up, maintenance is neglected and one-time "assessment" charges are levied.

Cutting losses

Time shares, like most cars, immediately plummet on the resale market. That's one of the reasons

banks won't finance them directly.

Fairfield, for example, was charging \$155 for 1,000 points earlier this year. Reserving a week at the company's two-bedroom Myrtle Beach units in the middle of summer requires at least 21,000 points. Yet those same points were fetching less than \$20 per 1,000 in recent eBay auctions — roughly 13 percent of the retail value. A

Summer Bay Resort time share in Las Vegas recently sold for \$26, according to a list of completed eBay auctions.

Wiegand's Timeshare Resale Alliance won't play with points. "We just tell people, 'I'm sorry that you bought them,'" he said.

Some developers discourage people from buying on the resale market by telling them they won't have as much booking clout or privileges if they buy a second-hand unit. And the industry is still plagued by shady resale firms, boiler rooms full of hucksters who promise great results — even profits — in exchange for a few hundred dollars. Most states outlawed these operations from charging an up-front listing fee, but some operators skirt the rules by calling the payments "appraisal" or "assessment" fees.

Pat Pendleton, who resells time

shares out of her Surfside Beach realty office, said most resale companies will "tell people anything" to get the up-front fee. "The majority of them are just advertising companies," she said. "They aren't even licensed to broker a sale. ... And they don't even have to sell them, because they're making so much money up front."

One of the biggest time share fans interviewed for this article was Jack Brewer, a restaurateur from Charleston, W.Va., who bought on the resale market. Over the years, Brewer purchased four time shares from Pendleton Realty, each for about what he would have paid to stay at a hotel for a week.

"It all works for me," Brewer said. "Resale time shares, as far as I'm concerned, is the way to go."

Adding it up

Helen Allston, however, could have rented a lot of nice hotel rooms for the thousands of dollars she and her boyfriend paid to a time share developer. And the thrill of being the owner of a vacation getaway wore off quickly for her, the day she received the gifts that helped clinch the deal.

"The steaks (they sent) were so tough that nobody could eat them; the grill was one of these dime-store Wal-Mart ones," she said.

Allston and her boyfriend have paid off the unit — \$353 a month for seven years, including \$11,031 to cover the developer's 14.4 percent interest rate. Even though she has never stayed at the Edisto Beach property, Allston still pays \$1,440 a year in maintenance fees. She also has forked over another \$700 to a Florida resale company that has yielded no results. Now, she's not even trying to recover her money. She's just hoping to get out of her contract and to stop the payments. If Allston stops sending checks, the developer will eventually take back the unit, but not before planting some red flags in her credit report.

"There's no way we could have used this thing enough to make our \$15,000 or \$20,000, or whatever we've got invested, worthwhile," she said.

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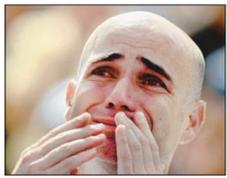
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A tearful farewell
Sports, 1C



WORK YOUR WORKSTATION

Six steps help you keep from getting bent out of shape. **Health & Science, 1E**

The Post and Courier

THE SOUTH'S OLDEST DAILY NEWSPAPER

September 4, 2006 • Charleston • North Charleston, S.C.

MONDAY

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Briefly



Trickle-down effect

The housing slowdown is predicted to affect consumer confidence and retail spending. **Section D**

Group makes quilts to comfort soldiers

Susan Thomas, whose daughter was deployed to the Middle East, was searching the Internet early one morning when she found a group that makes quilts for wounded service men and women. So far, Thomas and the group have made 250 quilts. **1B**

Grass-fed beef might be something less

The Agriculture Department has proposed a standard for grass-fed meat that doesn't say animals need pasture and that broadly defines grass to include things that aren't, well, grass. **7A**

Al-Qaida's No. 2 leader in Iraq taken prisoner

Hamed Jumaa Farid al-Saeedi was captured north of Baghdad, officials say. One said al-Qaida in Iraq suffers from "a serious leadership crisis." **4AA**

Preservation center has work cut out for it

As executive director of New Orleans' Preservation Resource Center, Patricia Gay is on the front lines in the struggle to preserve 38,000 buildings in the city's 19 historic districts. **1B**



ARTIST'S RENDERING/EUROPEAN SPACE AGENCY/AP

Spacecraft crashes just like it was supposed to

The deliberate crash of the European Space Agency vehicle capped a mission that tested new technologies and collected data that scientists hope will tell more about the area. **5A**



Today's outlook
A thunderstorm this afternoon. High 90. Low 73. Complete 5-day forecast, **8B**

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A LITTLE PIECE OF HEAVEN OR THE INVESTMENT FROM HELL?

Protections failing time share buyers

Sales unchecked by complaints, lawsuits

BY KYLE STOCK
The Post and Courier

South Carolina has more time shares than every U.S. state except Florida, but the agency that regulates the industry has been hamstrung by budget cuts and now only has one person assigned to time share complaints.

Despite 32 pages of laws on time shares, South Carolina's system of consumer protections is failing aggrieved buyers — people who thought they were buying a product, rather than paying their way into a tricky system of bidding and



SATURDAY
Business is booming in the industry, especially in S.C.

SUNDAY
You get what you pay for, but what are you paying for?

TODAY
South Carolina's consumer protection system is failing time share buyers.

On Page 2AA ▶ What exactly is a time share? ▶ Meet a woman who aids the cast-offs. ▶ Who are the major players in the time-share market?

swapping and scrapping for service.

The South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs received 135 complaints about time shares in the past three years; almost one every week. In recent years, as the industry surged and a wave of new units went up from the Grand Strand to

Beaufort, the state cut funding for oversight. Ken Kitts, time share coordinator at the South Carolina Real Estate Commission, is now the only state employee keeping an eye on the time share industry, which in South Carolina now comprises 14 developers and 130 resorts. Two-thirds

of the state's time share investigative staff has been laid off or reassigned since the late-1990s, which means the commission no longer has enough workers on payroll to anonymously screen sales pitches.

Please see **TIME SHARES**, Page 2AA

"The school needs to get more buses because it's not really fun for us to wait around here every day. But I guess we are kind of getting used to it by now."

Katrina Scholl, Fort Dorchester Elementary School fifth-grader



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRAD NETTLES/STAFF

Fort Dorchester Elementary School fifth-graders Courtney Wiand (left) and Katrina Scholl work on homework as they wait for their bus Aug. 28 in a school hallway as another student grabs a few minutes of downtime. The students are part of the second shift of bus riders.

Long wait for a ride home

BY MINDY B. HAGEN
The Post and Courier

Some youngsters stretch out on the hallway floor, closing their eyes and hoping for a few moments of sweet shut-eye. Others lean against windows and walls and remove worksheets from their backpacks, taking a first glance at the evening's homework assignment. Several children stare straight ahead, or jiggle their bodies until they find a semi-comfortable sitting position.

The hallways inside South Carolina's largest elementary school are lined with roughly 200 bored, antsy and tired students after the dismissal bell rings each day. With an enrollment that's doubled in four years to 1,500 students, Fort Dorchester Elementary has grown too large too fast. No longer are there enough available buses to transport all of the students who want to ride the vehicles home from the Dorchester District 2 school. The school, located inside Wescott

Please see **BUSES**, Page 4A

Coping with Growth

At Fort Dorchester Elementary

This is the second story in an occasional series this academic year studying the efforts to teach 1,500 children at the state's largest elementary school.



Physical education teacher Laurel Shirey keeps students occupied by playing follow the leader. The students must wait for the first round of buses to return to the school to take them home.

Identity theft with a twist

Illegals using stolen numbers just to live

BY JOHN LELAND
New York Times

Camber Lybbert thought it was a mistake when her bank told her that her daughter's Social Security number was on their files for two credit cards and two auto loans, with an outstanding balance of more than \$25,000.

Her daughter is 3 years old. For Lybbert and her husband Tyson, the call was the beginning of a five-month scramble trying to clear up their daughter's credit history. As it turned out, an illegal immigrant named Jose Tinoco had stolen their daughter's Social Security number, not in pursuit of a financial crime, but in order to get a job.

"From what I've picked up, he wasn't using it maliciously," Lybbert said. "He was using it to have a job, to get a car, provide for his family. My husband's like, 'Don't you feel bad, you've ruined this guy's life?' But at the same time he's ruined the innocence of her Social Security number, because when she goes to apply for loans she's going to have this history."

Though most people think of identity theft as a financial crime, one of the most common forms involves illegal immigrants using fraudulent Social Security numbers to conduct their daily lives.

Please see **THEFT**, Page 4A

New portrait of first slaves at Jamestown

BY LISA REIN
The Washington Post

JAMESTOWN, VA. — They were known as the "20 and odd," the first African slaves to set foot in North America at the English colony settled in 1607.

For nearly 400 years, historians thought they were brought to Virginia from the West Indies on a Dutch warship. Little else was known of the Africans, who left no traces.

Now, new scholarship and trans-Atlantic detective work have solved the puzzle of who they were and where their forced journey across the Atlantic Ocean began.

The slaves were herded onto a Portuguese slave ship in the southwest African country of Angola. The ship was seized by the

Please see **SLAVES**, Page 4A

FROM 1A

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT THE SCRUPLES OF THE TIME SHARE INDUSTRY

"They're making so much money it's scary, but as far as the poor customer is concerned, I feel sorry for them. It's a shame because if they would straighten up their act, it's a good product. Underneath all this hocus-pocus, it is a good product."

Byron Wiegand, a former time share developer who now owns a California time share resale firm

"We're serious about it (battling the industry's bad reputation). We were founded to protect the good guys, because there are still some bad guys. ... It would be counterintuitive to purposely have an industry that's trying to be unscrupulous."

Howard Nusbaum, president of the American Resort Development Association, the time share industry trade group

State agencies failing to protect time share buyers

TIME SHARES From Page 1A

"We only have time now to respond to complaints," Kitts said. "The business has grown, and our staff has shrunk."

If a time share company decided to bilk buyers or oversell a resort — which would be illegal — the commission admits it might not catch the fraud. Its investigators don't audit time share companies to see if the number of points they sold is more than can be accommodated in their respective units in a given year. And the federal government leaves time share regulations to individual states, according to a spokeswoman with the Federal Trade Commission.

South Carolina also stopped screening time share promoters in October 2003. Would-be sales representatives used to have to pass a 50-question test on how well they knew the state's time share laws. Kitts said abolishing the test was a move to hold the development companies responsible for their employees, as opposed to the state treating salespeople like independent contractors. As an example, he said that in the event of a bridge collapsing, a government would blame engineers and architects, not the workers mixing cement and tightening bolts.

Lawmakers also have failed to extend the state's five-day window of time in which consumers are allowed to cancel time share contracts.

The rescission period was extended from four days to five in 2003 and the commission voiced support for a longer window, but no such proposal has been filed in the General Assembly. Buyers in Florida, the No. 1 time share state in the country, have twice as long to cancel a signed contract, 10 days. Arizona and Hawaii both give consumers a full week to rescind. And the United Kingdom requires that time share companies honor a 14-day cancellation period.

Kitts noted that a lot of buyers don't even read through their contracts until they get home from vacation, often after the rescission window has passed.

Early this summer, lawmakers did pass a law that requires an attorney paid by the consumer to be present at time share closings, unless the buyer signs a document waiving that right. Consumer advocates said the law will just add one more document to the stack of papers that buyers generally sign with little review.

Most of what state regulators do now is broker peace accords between disgruntled buyers and the companies they bought their units from. Developers sometimes relent to commission pressure, although many are unyielding to complaints from buyers.

In 1981, when lawmakers first started to regulate time share sales, the General Assembly established a pool of money dubbed the Vacation Time Sharing Recovery Fund to reimburse consumers who lose money to unscrupulous sellers. At one time about \$250,000 was available for aggrieved time share owners, but it never was used to make buyers whole. The fund has been empty for years, siphoned off by lawmakers for other projects. The Real Estate Commission said the money was never needed.

"It was our hammer with which we'd put the time share industry on the anvil," Kitts said. "Over my time here, we have been successful in getting many problems resolved because of the cooperative nature of everyone. ... We didn't really feel we had to use it."

An effort at ethics

Since it formed its own trade group in 1969, the time share industry has sought to police itself. It has battled a bad reputation for a long time, a reputation that harms the many outstanding players in the time share game, according to Howard Nusbaum, president of the American Re-



MELISSA HANELINE/STAFF

Pat Pendleton looks for papers in her office in Surfside Beach. Pendleton's company resells time shares for current owners.

Real estate agent aids time share cast-offs

BY KYLE STOCK
The Post and Courier

Pat Pendleton is a bit of a softie. Her Surfside Beach real estate office is full of stray cats that she did not have the heart to turn away.

Pendleton has the same problem when it comes to distraught time share owners — the hordes of financially anemic consumers deserted by the industry. They call her in tears. They come into her office and beg. "There are so many injustices in the business," she said. "They think I'm the greatest thing since white bread."

This is why Pendleton, at a spry 64 years old, has not hit it big by flipping million-dollar beach homes. She spends almost all of her time collecting time share cast-offs and matching them up with savvy buyers, bargain hunters happy to snap up a time share unit for thousands of dollars less than developers are selling them for. Not all of Pendleton's sellers are thrilled to hear how much money they will lose on their investment, but

On the Web

www.pendletonrealty.net

Pendleton is a realist about the dismal resale value of time shares.

"I say 'I can either tell you the truth or tell you what you want to hear,'" she explained.

Pendleton started selling real estate in Columbia 25 years ago. She moved to Myrtle Beach in 1987 and, as a relatively green broker in a new office, she started handling time share sales. A few years later she incorporated Pendleton Realty Inc., now a six-person business that almost exclusively handles fractional properties.

"I guess it just became my niche," she said.

Building the business has not been easy. Developers don't want to lose market share and don't want word to get out that their time share units can be had for 30 percent to 50 percent less, on average, than the prices they set. They often don't let Pendleton on their properties, and they try

to scare consumers away from the resale market by telling them "used" time shares don't come with the same perks and reservation clout.

"It's just lies really — baldfaced," Pendleton explained.

And then there is the constant image battle. For years, the time share resale industry comprised boiler rooms of swindlers calling owners and promising to flip their unit at a profit if they pay a few hundred dollars up front. Most of those shops never advertised any units, let alone sold them. Lawmakers and attorneys general have cracked down on some, but not all, of those operations.

Meanwhile, Pendleton has kept shuffling around her cramped strip-mall office; punching on a speakerphone to listen to the sobs of another potential client; spinning through her vast Rolodex of time share fans; and shooting stray cats off of her cluttered desk.

"I've never had a complaint from a buyer," Pendleton said. "And I don't know how many time share developers can say that."

Major players in the time share industry

Wyndham Worldwide Corp.	17,000 units	140 properties
Marriott International Inc.	10,334 units	52 properties
Sunterra Corp.	7,030 units	59 properties
Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide Inc.	6,000 units	19 properties
Hilton Hotels Corp.	4,272 units	40 properties
Bluegreen Corp.	3,141 units	21 properties
Walt Disney Co.	2,400 units	7 properties

sort Development Association, the time share industry trade group.

"We're serious about it," Nusbaum said. "We were founded to protect the good guys, because there are still some bad guys. ... It would be counterintuitive to purposely have an industry that's trying to be unscrupulous."

The association lobbied in favor of many state time share laws and has a 25-page "code of standards and ethics" that says developers must avoid false statements and honor consumers' rescission rights, among other things. The document also includes a "customer bill of rights" that reads: "You are the most important person in our business; without our owners and potential owners, we

have nothing to offer our community or our industry."

Nusbaum said those kinds of consumer protections have fueled time share sales in recent years. Big-name corporations such as Marriott International Inc. and Walt Disney Co. grabbing huge swaths of market share has not hurt either. But the industry ethics code does not preclude developers from managing the units they sell. And the association acknowledged that illegal sales tactics remain one of the industry's biggest problems.

When asked about recent complaints and lawsuits, Nusbaum said most come from consumers who don't fully understand what they are buying.

"It's true of any industry," he

said. "If I went and bought a brand new computer and didn't know how to use it, I wouldn't be too happy about it."

In a much publicized lawsuit filed in Florida in July 2005, four plaintiffs allege that they were never able to make reservations at the Fairfield Inc. resorts where they had bought time share points. The same resorts, however, offered to rent units to them at rates similar to a hotel.

When The Post and Courier published a story about the case in October 2005, about 15 Charleston-area residents called the newspaper to report similar experiences and to ask how to join the lawsuit. Wyndham Worldwide Corp., the company that owns Fairfield, declined

What exactly is a time share?

Time shares are residences sold off in chunks of time, so that a buyer owns a fraction — such as one week — of a development, rather than buying an entire house, apartment or condo. Buyers may get a deed or just a contractual right to use the property for a week or two a year. They are sold in the following three ways:

FIXED WEEK: Buyer occupies a specific unit during a specific week or weeks every year.

FLOATING WEEK: Buyer occupies a specific type of unit for a set amount of time within a certain season or defined window of time each year.

POINTS: Buyer uses a prescribed amount of points — or time-share currency — to book any unit in any of the seller's resorts at any time of year.

owners in the country — nearly 600,000 households — are unhappy with their purchase. And that's by the time share industry's own reckoning.

Byron Wiegand, a former time share developer who now owns a California time share resale firm, said there are "worms" in the industry, "people who have to steal" sully the entire market.

"They're making so much money it's scary, but as far as the poor customer is concerned, I feel sorry for them," Wiegand said. "It's a shame because if they would straighten up their act, it's a good product. Underneath all this hocus-pocus, it is a good product."

Nusbaum contends that the time share industry was never that corrupt, even in its early days. He said there were a lot of reputable players and some "colorful, bad ones."

"And you know which ones are going to make the news," he said. "I think that today's time share industry has been a tide that has risen all boats. ... You've got some trophy, nameplate publicly traded companies in this industry that aren't going to do anything to tarnish their image or hurt their shareholders."

Marriott International Inc., one of the world's largest hotel companies, got 15 percent of its revenue last year from time shares.

"The product has continued to evolve and be better and better," said Marriott spokesman Ed Kinney. "At one point there was a threshold that customers would be willing to pay for a time share, but now it's hard to say. We have weeks in Hawaii going for \$114,000 a piece, and they're selling out."

Marriott has one of the best reputations in the time share industry, although it has an "unsatisfactory record" with the Better Business Bureau, including a handful of unresolved complaints. Kinney said he does not think his company will be affected by lawsuits against some of its competitors and noted that more than 93 percent of Marriott time share buyers are "satisfied" or "very satisfied," according to the company's own surveys.

"If anything else, it's going to allow people to go to those companies that they recognize and they trust the most," he said.

Complaints or not, the industry is showing no signs of slowing down. In a recent report, Bear Stearns, a New York investment bank, estimated that the time share business will generate \$42 billion in sales over the next 10 years. The firm thinks big-name developers will continue to post 20 percent profit margins on their fractional units and time shares will soon be owned by 15 percent of "eligible households" — people between 35 and 65 years old who make more than \$75,000 a year.

"I'm pretty proud of our industry," Nusbaum said. "We're in a sweet spot right now."

Reach Kyle Stock at 937-5763 or kstock@postandcourier.com.



Realtors study time-share issue

Group says it will look for ways to help buyers, benefit overall market

BY KYLE STOCK
The Post and Courier

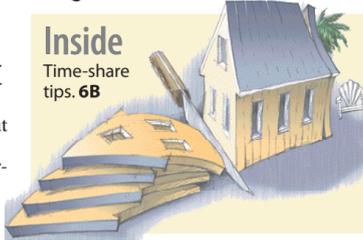
The South Carolina Association of Realtors is examining ways to beef up the state's time-share laws, citing a recent series of articles by The Post and Courier that detailed a rash of complaints and lawsuits from buyers of the vacation properties.

South Carolina has more time-share resorts than every state but Florida. It also has 32 pages of laws concerning the industry. But as business surged and a wave of new units went up from the

Grand Strand to Beaufort, the state cut funding for oversight.

"We're very concerned about the apparent lack of investigatory ability," said Nick Kremydas, chief executive of the association, which is made up of about 20,000 real estate agents. "And we want to make sure our laws are as consumer-friendly as they can be, balanced with the interests of the industry."

The Columbia-based trade group plans to compare South Carolina's regulations to those in other states over the next few weeks. Kremydas said researchers may draft stronger measures for the General



"We want to make sure our laws are as consumer-friendly as they can be, balanced with the interests of the industry."

Nick Kremydas, CEO of South Carolina Association of Realtors

Assembly to consider when the legislative session starts in January.

"Maybe it's time to look at some additional changes," he said. "That's the good thing about our statutes and code of laws — as an industry changes, we have the power to change the rules to better fit it. ... I can tell you that the legislature would

be very concerned about issues like the ones you all raised in the paper."

Ken Kitts, time-share coordinator at the state Real Estate Commission, is now the only state employee keeping an eye on the industry, which in South Carolina comprises 14 developers and 130 resorts. Two-thirds of the state's time-share in-

vestigative staff has been laid off or reassigned since the late 1990s, meaning the commission no longer has enough workers on payroll to anonymously screen sales pitches.

The Post and Courier published a series of articles earlier this month detailing mounting complaints and lawsuits connected to the time-share industry.

The reports pointed out that would-be time-share sales representatives are no longer required to pass a 50-question test on how well they know South Carolina's time-share laws. The state stopped those screenings in 2003.

Also, the series noted that South Carolina gives consumers five days to cancel time-share contracts, a shorter period

Please see TIME SHARE, Page 6B

Students condemn vandals

Security heavy at West Ashley game

BY NADINE PARKS
The Post and Courier

It was a toilet paper raid gone awry. A group of West Ashley High School students had planned to wrap the James Island Charter High School in tissue on Thursday. But when part of the group arrived and found two students there spray-painting vulgar symbols and language, they left, Charleston police Lt. Charles Hawkins said.

West Ashley students at a rivalry football game against James Island on Friday night said the vandals do not represent their school. Hawkins said he doesn't know how many other West Ashley students showed up for the raid, but no further arrests are expected.

When West Ashley senior Donovan Vedad and former student Phillip Ryan were finished at about 3:45 a.m. Thursday, they had done about \$10,000 in damage, Hawkins said. They surrendered to police later in the day, signed confessions and were charged with felony malicious injury to property.

A surveillance video from the James Island school shows what appears to be several people arriving in a red, four-door sedan about the same time that Vedad and Ryan were caught on tape vandalizing the school.

The raid was on the eve of a football matchup between the schools. Nearly 2,000 people turned out for the

Please see VANDALISM, Page 6B

"It put a bad name on our school, and we're not like that."

Drew Crowell, West Ashley High School senior

On the Net

To view the video of the vandalism of James Island Charter High School, go to www.charleston.net/webextras.

"We want to come back next year but are scared because we don't know what we will find." — Debbie Stinchcomb, Wild Dunes condo renter



ALAN HAWES/STAFF

Jeff Stinchcomb of Summerville sits Friday near the condos on the north end of Wild Dunes, where beach erosion is threatening the property. He rents a condo on the beach every year with his wife, Debbie.

Wind, waves and tides ate away at Lowcountry beaches

Nor'easter blew in and sand washed out

BY BO PETERSEN
The Post and Courier

While nobody inland was paying attention, a nor'easter storm blew through earlier this week and did a number on Lowcountry beaches.

A confluence of full moon flood tides, prevailing northeast winds and large swells from Hurricane Florence nearly 1,000 miles out to sea drove the surf to the doorsteps of condos at Wild Dunes, through the sand fences short of the dunes of the newly renourished Folly Beach, and over a lot, across Palmetto Boulevard and down side streets on Edisto Beach.

All that while the sun shone and temperature was in the 80s.

"If you don't live on the beaches you probably didn't know what was going

on," said Bill Eiser, S.C. Ocean and Coastal Resources oceanographer. "We had some really big swells rolling in. It was certainly the worst erosion we've had since last fall when (Tropical Storm) Ophelia brushed by. It was the same level as a bad nor'easter."

At Wild Dunes on Isle of Palms, the tides worsened damage already taking place as a sandbar migrates along the shore, eroding the beach to either side. In places, 150 feet of beach has been lost in the past two years, Eiser said.

On Folly, the tides exacerbated erosion on the east end near the Washout surfing area, near a few homes on the edge of the beach wash, and near a renourishment spot where Ophelia and other storms eroded sand while the project was still under way.

"As much as 85 percent of renourishment sand is gone. Gone. Gone away. Disappeared. Well, actually it's on the west end, in the Folly River or the Stono Inlet," said Mayor Carl Beckmann. The

Army Corps of Engineers is planning for a \$6 million to \$7 million boost of supplemental sand to that project that should get under way in January 2007, said Lisa Metheny, Charleston branch program management chief.

Farther down the coast, Kiawah Island escaped serious damage to the renourishment project around the Ocean Course, said town wildlife biologist Jim Jordan. The beach overwash at Edisto, where a renourishment project was completed earlier this year caused some concern, said Town Manager Linda Woods. "I think we're OK," she said.

Metheny said all the sand might not be lost for good. "Sometimes the sand just goes a little offshore, and as Mother Nature goes, comes right back onshore in a cycle of erosion and accretion."

Reach **Bo Petersen** at 745-5852 or bpetersen@postandcourier.com.

Internet predator sentence faulted

Lack of jail time too lenient, says attorney general

BY SCHUYLER KROPF
The Post and Courier

Attorney General Henry McMaster is criticizing what he said is a lenient sentence given to a Charleston Internet predator that did not include jail time.

Elliot A. Kohn, 26, was given five years of probation and 150 hours of community service Wednesday by Circuit Judge Markley Dennis after he pleaded guilty to three charges associated with soliciting sex from minors.

By comparison, the lightest jail sentence given in eight Internet predator cases prosecuted by the Attorney General's office that resulted in guilty pleas has been 90 days, McMaster said. Other defendants received sentences of several years, McMaster said.

"With all due respect to the judge, we disagree with the sentence," McMaster said.

Kohn was spared jail time after a forensic psychiatrist said he suffered various disorders but was not a pedophile. As a result of the sentence, Kohn must register as a sex offender and his movements around the community are limited. He cannot have contact with persons under 18, other than family.

Christopher Skipper, one of Kohn's defense attorneys, disagreed with McMaster.

"In light of the evidence and testimony presented at the hearing, we believe it was an appropriate sentence," he said.

Authorities said Kohn used explicit language in trying to set up meetings for sex with teenage girls, although no physical contact was made.

One of the girls was a city of Charleston police officer working undercover whom Kohn traveled to meet at an undisclosed location. The other was a 15-year-old girl from Clinton who opted not to appear at Kohn's sentencing to testify.

McMaster said he is concerned Kohn's sentence might affect sentences handed down in other Internet solicitation cases. At least 29 other such cases are awaiting prosecution, his office said.

Reach **Schuyler Kropf** at 937-5551 or skropf@postandcourier.com.

Man shot to death, woman charged

BY NITA BIRMINGHAM
The Post and Courier

LADSON — Berkeley County surpassed last year's total homicides Thursday night when a 33-year-old man was shot to death at a friend's house in College Park.

Sheriff's detectives arrested Stephanie Morosi, 30, on a charge of murder, Capt. Rick Ollic said. Coroner Glenn Rhoad pronounced Jason Maxwell Truitt dead in Morosi's house shortly after the shooting was reported at 8 p.m.

Morosi was scheduled to have a bond hearing Friday evening in Moncks Cor-



Morosi

ner, but a magistrate can't set bail on a murder charge.

It was the ninth homicide so far this year in the county. There were eight in 2005, three in 2004 and nine in 2003.

Truitt was killed in a bedroom of 122 Hartford Drive, but Ollic wouldn't say how many times he was shot or where he was wounded. Detectives were tracking ownership of the handgun Friday.

The Sheriff's Office had no previous

reports of domestic violence calls at the house, he said.

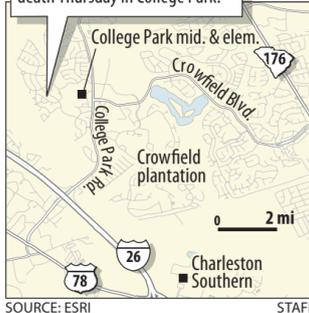
Neighbor Donald Strickland said he and his wife weren't aware anything was wrong next door until they took their dogs out and saw the deputies' cars. Morosi's father came to the house and told them she was having problems with Truitt, Strickland said.

Ollic described Truitt and Morosi as acquaintances but said Truitt's last known address was the Hartford Drive house.

Reach **Nita Birmingham** at nbirmingham@postandcourier.com or 745-5858.

Ladson shooting

A 33-year-old man was shot to death Thursday in College Park.



SOURCE: ESRI

STAFF

Students condemn vandals

PAINTING From Page 1B

big game Friday night at the James Island school. They arrived to find about 15 Charleston police officers staged strategically across the campus for security. A typical game would have about six officers, Hawkins said.

Students from both schools visited each other on opposing sides of the football field, and many of them said the vandal's actions were an embarrassment for everyone.

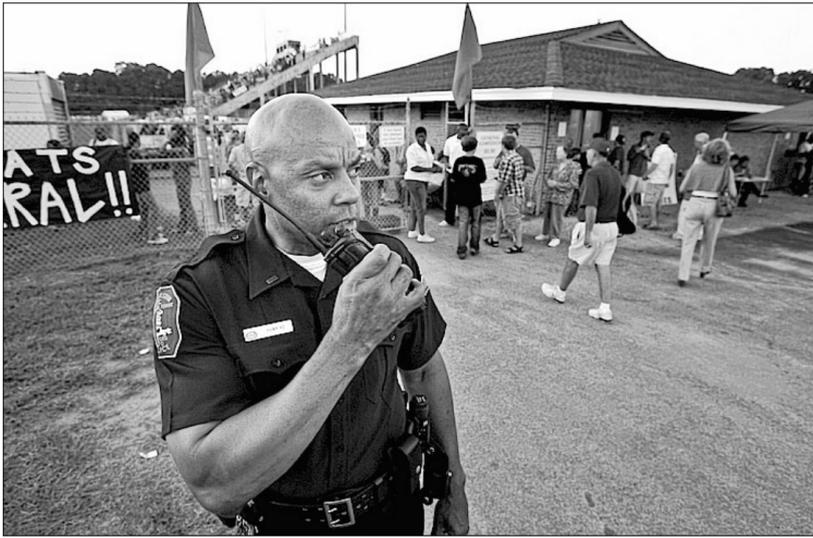
"It made it seem like everybody at our school is against James Island, and we're not," said West Ashley senior Heather Robertson.

Another senior at the West Ashley school who had nearly lost his voice after rooting for his team said most students just want to have fun and cheer on their school.

"It put a bad name on our school, and we're not like that," Drew Crowell said.

Some James Island students were heartbroken by the heavy damage to their school.

James Island student Lindsey Chappell said that when someone had burned a paw print — the symbol of the West Ashley Wildcats team — on the football field



TYRONE WALKER/STAFF

Lt. Charles Hawkins of the Charleston Police Department talks with other officers in a beefed-up patrol sent to keep a close eye on the crowd Friday at the football game between West Ashley and James Island Charter high schools.

"It made it seem like everybody at our school is against James Island, and we're not."

Heather Robertson, West Ashley High School senior

at James Island two years ago, she had almost admired the vandals. "That's clever, and it didn't harm anything or cost anything," she said. "But what they did (Thursday) was just way overboard."

John Brown, who graduated from James Island in 2004, said he cried

when he saw the vandalism.

Magistrate James Gosnell on Friday set Ryan's bail at \$10,000 and Vedad's bail at \$20,000, citing a recent arrest on charges of drinking alcohol in public and possession of marijuana for the higher amount.

Additionally, the magistrate placed several conditions on their bond: The teens are not to speak to each other; they are barred from trespassing on the grounds of James Island Charter High School; and they will remain under 24-hour house arrest until their cases are resolved.

Reach **Nadine Parks** at nparks@postandcourier.com or 937-5573.

Realtors looking at time shares

TIME SHARE From Page 1B

than other states allow.

Buyers in Florida, the nation's time-share mecca, have 10 days to cancel a signed contract.

Arizona and Hawaii both give consumers a week to rescind. And the United Kingdom requires that time-share sellers honor a 14-day cancellation period.

James Teodosio, a 77-year-old Charleston resident, was one of the aggrieved buyers who called the newspaper and the state Real Estate Commission this week in response to the stories. Teodosio spent almost \$15,000 on a Myrtle Beach time-share resort in 2002. He said he has never been able to make a reservation, and that each time he called he was told he was a little too late.

Although the developer is selling those same units for almost \$22,000 today, Teodosio has had no luck in reselling his. "I'm an engineer," he said. "I should have some brains in my head. But I swear ... I don't know what to do with that thing."

Reach **Kyle Stock** at 937-5763 or kstock@postandcourier.com.

Time-share tips

Here are some important steps before signing on the dotted line.

- ▶ Be proactive. Research where you want to buy, how much you can spend and what ownership arrangement would be best.
- ▶ Examine alternatives in the same area such as condo and home rentals.
- ▶ See how much units in your resort of choice are selling for on the resale market.
- ▶ Check for complaints about the developer at the state Real Estate Commission, the Better Business Bureau, the attorney general's office and the Federal Trade Commission.
- ▶ Find out if the developer has any financial interest in managing the property and ask if the unit has a cap on maintenance and assessment fees.
- ▶ Ask for a copy of the current maintenance budget for the property.
- ▶ Don't buckle to pressure; take a few days to think about the offer and read the paperwork carefully outside of the sales office.
- ▶ Consider having an attorney read over the contract.
- ▶ Talk to guests at the resort and see what other time share owners have to say on message boards like www.tug2.net.
- ▶ If you decide to rescind your purchase, cancel your contract in writing and send the letter by certified mail, return receipt requested.

SOURCE: Federal Trade Commission

CARTA faces park-and-ride system stall

Contract issues threaten deadline

BY TENISHA WALDO
The Post and Courier



FILE/TYRONE WALKER/STAFF

CARTA is facing yet another hurdle in trying to implement its anticipated commuter express park-and-ride system, which originally was scheduled to be up and running by next month.

The Charleston Area Regional Transportation Authority has run into problems with the company contracted to paint the 15 express buses, CARTA executive director Howard Chapman said. Chapman wouldn't share specifics, and the manager at Premiere Paint & Body shop in St. George declined to comment Friday.

CARTA's board had awarded a professional paint services contract to the St. George shop after it submitted the least expensive price in August. The acceptance process for new bids from interested contractors will be cut down, Chapman said, so the board of directors can review and find a replacement at its next meeting Oct. 18.

The board also gave final approval Friday to its 2007 budget — already given the thumbs up from all eight municipalities overseeing the transit authority — allowing CARTA to move forward with the express service.

CARTA gained an additional \$1.1 million for next year after Charleston County Council agreed to pay off a debt on its Leeds Avenue fa-

Schedule change

The Charleston Area Regional Transportation Authority's board changed its monthly meeting time to be every third Wednesday at 2 p.m.

cility, using money from the half-cent sales tax to eventually cover the rest of the \$5.7 million debt.

Its budget had been amended to cover the commuter system, including fuel and operation fees, and construction at the North Charleston Intermodal Facility site at Centre Pointe. Parking spaces also have been secured at Citadel Mall, the Super Kmart in North Charleston and at the old Berle Shopping Center off Folly Road to accommodate park-and-ride commuters.

Chapman said he is unsure when the express service will start rolling.

Reach **Tenisha Waldo** at twaldo@postandcourier.com or 937-5744.

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CITY OF NORTH CHARLESTON PUBLIC HEARING

THE NORTH CHARLESTON ZONING BOARD OF APPEALS WILL HOLD A PUBLIC HEARING ON MONDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2006 AT 5:00 P.M. AT NORTH CHARLESTON CITY HALL, 4900 LACROSS ROAD, 1st FLOOR CONFERENCE ROOM, NORTH CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA, FOR THE PURPOSE OF CONSIDERING THE FOLLOWING:

A rehearing of a variance from Article VIII, Section 8-11 paragraph (5) relating to the number of freestanding signs allowed for a shopping center for the property located at 4400 Dorchester Road (TMS# 411-05-00-234) in the B-2, General Business zoning district.

A variance from Article IV, Section 4-5, paragraph (d) relating to the reestablishment of a legal nonconforming duplex for the property located at 2920 Norwood Street (TMS#469-16-00-179) I the R-1, Single-Family Residential zoning district.

A variance from Article VI, Section 6-12, Paragraph d(1) relating to the required Type "A" Buffer for the property identified as TMS#181-00-00-076 (Summer's Bend), at the corner of Park Forest Parkway and Amsley Trail in the R-2, Multi-Family Residential zoning district.

A variance from Article VI, Section 6-16, paragraph (d) relating to the illegal tree cutting for the property located at 8500 Palmetto Commerce Parkway (TMS#393-00-00-031) in the M-1, Light Industrial zoning district.

A variance from Article VI, Section 6-16, paragraph (b) relating to the removal of a Grand Tree for the property located at 3636 West Montague Avenue (TMS#409-09-00-074) in the CRD, Commercial Redevelopment district.

Those persons who wish to appear before the Commission should sign-in or contact the office of the Department of Planning and Management (740-2571) no later than 4:45 P.M. on the date of the meeting.

ADRIENNE K. WILLIAMS
ADMINISTRATIVE SECRETARY
CITY OF NORTH CHARLESTON
(843) 740-2571/Fax: 308-4727

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The Post and Courier

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Briefly



Bush delays speech on Iraq until January

President Bush knows his general direction on the Iraq war, but he will not unveil it to the public until January. The White House earlier indicated such an announcement would come before Christmas. Military commanders and others have recommended many things that they feel could improve conditions in Iraq. 5AA

Charleston home sales drop off in November

The red hot Charleston housing market is cooling off, with home sales in the tri-county area down by 4.8 percent compared with last year's figures. "We're in a more realistic phase now," says William S. Smith, a broker for Hartnett Realty Co. 11A

New 'Left Behind' game draws criticism

Groups have called for boycotts and critics have said "Left Behind: Eternal Forces" glorifies religious violence against non-Christians. Game makers contend the violence from the good side is exclusively defensive, and should not be seen as contrary to church teachings. 7A

Clemson gets the OK for Hunley restoration

Despite Gov. Mark Sanford's doubts about the project, Clemson University picked up support to take over the restoration of the Confederate submarine H.L. Hunley as part of a new North Charleston campus focusing on materials science, historic preservation and urban ecology. 1B

Coming Thursday

PS3 and Wii GAME CHOICES: You've bought a PS3 or Wii after standing in line for hours, but can't decide on which games are best. Check out our family-friendly choices. **Family Life**



Today's outlook
Cloudy then rain.
High 66. Low 45.
Complete 5-day
forecast, 14B.

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Investigators hit dead end

Officials close case on teacher who ingested antifreeze at elementary school

BY GLENN SMITH
AND MINDY B. HAGEN
The Post and Courier

GOOSE CREEK — The kids knew something was wrong.

Their teacher grew flush. She talked in a strange voice and repeated herself. She wiped ink from a projector screen and smeared it around her mouth and

tongue. She leaned over and vomited in a garbage can.

Two fifth-graders started crying as they watched the woman move around woozily. Another ran to get help. One frightened student wondered if the teacher was on drugs. The truth proved more ominous: The teacher had ingested a potentially fatal dose of a chemical found in automotive antifreeze.

Investigators found antifreeze in two sports drink bottles left in a closet in the teacher's classroom at Boulder Bluff Elementary School. But after three weeks of investigation, Goose Creek police still don't know why the bottles were there or how the teacher came to swallow the dangerous chemicals Nov. 16.

Those answers may remain a mystery. Police opted to close the case last week

after reaching a dead end in the investigation. Police released the investigative file Tuesday in response to a Freedom of Information Act request from The Post and Courier.

The teacher, who has since returned to work, has declined to discuss the episode with The Post and Courier.

Please see TEACHER, Page 12A

Weaving history into a growing area

Sweetgrass Basket Overlay District OK'd along U.S. 17



ALAN HAWES/STAFF

Henry Wigfall (right) works on a sweetgrass basket in his stand beside U.S. Highway 17 in Mount Pleasant Tuesday.

Town, county help preserve important craft

BY PRENTISS FINDLAY
The Post and Courier

MOUNT PLEASANT — Life got sweeter Tuesday night for the basket makers and sellers who dot the roadside on U.S. Highway 17.

Town Council gave initial approval to a Sweetgrass Basket Overlay District, which is a joint effort with Charleston County to recognize and protect the art form that has been a part of the community for more than 300 years.

Sweetgrass basket making will be featured at the town's new Memorial Waterfront Park at a Sweetgrass Basket Pavilion. The S.C. Arts Commission a few days ago awarded the town \$14,319 for the pavilion, which will provide a place for sweetgrass basket makers to practice their craft and sell their wares. The park is scheduled to open in the summer of 2008.

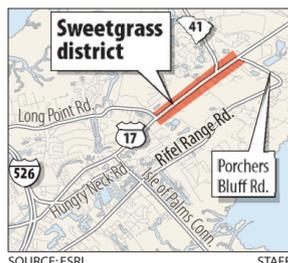
West African slaves brought sweetgrass basket making to the Lowcountry. Today, their descendants' work stands next to the din of U.S. 17 and the booming commercial and residential growth of the town.

Councilwoman Thomasena Stokes-Marshall is a champion of the sweetgrass culture east of the Cooper. She worked to secure the sweetgrass pavilion grant for the park, and is keenly aware of the challenges the sweetgrass basket makers face as they work to preserve a living legacy of the Lowcountry.

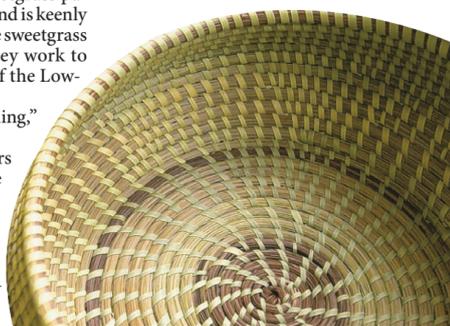
"The art form is diminishing," Stokes-Marshall said.

Sweetgrass basket makers have had run-ins with the state Department of Revenue over business licenses and sales taxes, and with

Please see DISTRICT, Page 9A



SOURCE: ESRI STAFF



More time to weigh the deal

Proposal could give time share buyers 10 days to rescind

BY KYLE STOCK
The Post and Courier

A state lawmaker is expected to file a bill today that would double the amount of time that South Carolina allows buyers to cancel a time share purchase, citing a recent series of articles by The Post and Courier that detailed a rash of consumer complaints and lawsuits.

The proposal by Rep. Chip Limehouse, R-Charleston, would give buyers 10 days to back out of a time share contract, rather than five.

"This particular provision is going to help a lot of people," Limehouse said. "Hindsight is always 20/20 and this is going to give people plenty of hindsight."

Many time shares are purchased by vacationers who buy on impulse, according to consumer advocates. Buyers often do little research before, or immediately after, signing their contracts.

Most states require that developers allow buyers to back out of a time share purchase agreement in five to seven days, according to the American Resort Development Association. Florida gives consumers 10 days to rescind, and Arizona and Hawaii both permit a seven-day cancellation period.

Limehouse, who is a commercial real estate broker, said his proposal is an attempt to regulate a market that at times operates "like the Wild West," not an effort to dampen time share sales.

"This is just consumer-friendly legislation," he said. "If it's a good product, it will certainly stand."

Deceptive sales pitches are one of the biggest problems in the time share industry, according to regulators at the South Carolina Real Estate Commission. The state no longer checks on sales practices, and it stopped screening time share sales staff in 2003. The commission has pushed for a longer rescission window, arguing that consumers need more time to see if the fine print of a contract matches up with what they were told during the sales

Please see TIME, Page 9A



Prime Minister Ehud Olmert

A nuclear slip — or a subtle warning?

BY RICHARD BOUDREAU
Los Angeles Times

JERUSALEM — For half a century, military censors have struggled to defend Israel's worst-kept secret — that the country possesses atomic weapons.

Even as its nuclear history

has leaked into declassified documents, articles and books, an official policy of "ambiguity" has endured. By refusing to confirm or deny that it has the bomb, and refraining from testing one, Israel has lived up to a quiet understanding with the United States to avoid fueling a Middle East arms race.

So why does it appear that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert finally spilled the beans?

In an interview on German television late Monday, the Israeli leader seemed to list Israel among the world's nuclear club members, raising an outcry across the political spectrum here and questions about whether the

long-standing policy had been abandoned.

Asked by the interviewer about Iran's calls for the destruction of Israel, Olmert replied that Israel had never threatened to annihilate anyone.

"Iran openly, explicitly and

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FROM 1A

Proposal could give time-share buyers 10 days to rescind

TIME From Page 1A

John Radcliffe, a retiree from North Charleston, is among those suing a Hilton Head Island time share developer over alleged deceptive practices. He paid \$11,000 for a unit in the Coral Sands resort that he said he has never been able to reserve. Throughout the sales pitch, Radcliffe, a former manager for the Marriott family of hotels, contended that the deal

was "too good to be true," but a steady stream of assurances from the sales representatives broke his resolve.

Radcliffe wrote a \$2,000 check and charged another \$9,000 on his credit card.

"I knew better, but I did it anyway," Radcliffe said. "I'm not sure this would have helped me, but if you can protect another 10 or 15 percent of buyers, it's worth it to do that."

Stories like Radcliffe's are not an

anomaly in South Carolina, a state that until recently was second only to Florida in the number of time share resorts.

At least seven lawsuits like Radcliffe's have been filed against the Hilton Head Island developer, and at least three other cases allege that one of the largest players in the U.S. industry unfairly manipulated its reservation systems.

In recent years, the South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs

has fielded about one complaint a week about the state's 14 time share sellers and 130 or so resorts.

The American Resort Development Association, recommends a five calendar days rescission window in the "model time share act." Lou Ann Burney, a spokeswoman for the group, declined to comment on Limehouse's proposal Tuesday because it had not yet been made public.

BlueGreen Corp., one of two

companies that owns and sells time shares in Charleston, also declined to comment Tuesday because its representatives had not yet seen the bill.

Festiva Resorts, the other time share company in Charleston, did not return phone calls.

Lawmakers will not consider the bill until they convene in January. But several influential members of the General Assembly, including House Speaker Bobby Harrell and Senate President Pro

Tem Glenn McConnell, have said that the legislature should review the state's 32 pages of time share laws.

The South Carolina Association of Realtors is reviewing how other states regulate the industry. Joel Sawyer, a spokesman for Gov. Mark Sanford, said the governor "would be open to" an audit of the state's time share laws.

Reach Kyle Stock at 937-5763 or kstock@postandcourier.com.

Big slip or subtle warning?

ISRAEL From Page 1A

map," Olmert said. "Can you say that this is the same level, when you are aspiring to have nuclear weapons, as America, France, Israel, Russia?"

Israel's newspapers reported the remark Tuesday under front-page headlines, one calling it a "nuclear slip of the lip."

Olmert's office said the quote was taken out of context and that he had been listing "responsible nations," not nuclear states. Aides also noted that the prime minister had refused several times during the interview to confirm that Israel has nuclear weapons and that he had spoken in English, not his native language.

Regardless, his critics pounced on the centrist prime minister for undermining a hallowed tenet of Israel's defense policy.

Yuval Steinitz, a member of parliament from the right-wing Likud Party, called for Olmert's resignation.

Silvan Shalom, a former foreign minister from Likud, said Olmert's comment could "cause great damage" to Israel's most important foreign policy goal, mobilizing international pressure to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

"We are constantly being asked by our enemies why we allegedly can, and Iran cannot," Shalom said.

On the left, parliament member Yossi Beilin of the Meretz Party said Olmert's "carelessness ... might be an indication that he isn't fit to serve as prime minister."

Olmert inherited a long tradition of secrecy. Surrounded at birth by hostile neighbors, Israel began building a nuclear bomb in the mid-1950s, aided by a secret agreement with France to help construct and supply a plutonium nuclear reactor in the Negev desert.

Since 1969, the United States has accepted Israel's status as a nuclear power and not pressed it to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which subjects its adherents to inspections and sanctions aimed at stopping the spread of weapons.

Intelligence analysts and independent experts have long known that the country has 100 to 200 sophisticated nuclear weapons, making it the region's sole nuclear power.

Some analysts believe that Israel, faced with the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran, has been seeking a way to go public with its own capabilities to maintain a deterrent advantage. Such thinking gained credence here last week when Robert Gates, the incoming U.S. secretary of defense, identified Israel as a nuclear power in testimony to a Senate committee.

"It could be that Olmert wanted to hint at Israel's capability as part of the aggressive statements he has recently been making, with the goal of warning the West that if they don't take care of Iran, Israel will," Israeli security analyst Ronen Bergman wrote in the newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth.

"On the other hand," he added, "this may have been a slip of the tongue."

Whatever the case, Olmert returned to a more ambiguous line Tuesday at a news conference during a visit to Berlin.

"Israel has said many times ... that we will not be the first country that introduces nuclear weapons to the Middle East," he said, repeating a formula meaning that it will not launch a first strike from its arsenal. "That was our position; that is our position. Nothing has changed."



Shalom

Sweetgrass Basket Overlay District OK'd along U.S. 17

DISTRICT From Page 1A

the state Department of Transportation over setting up shop in the right of way of U.S. 17.

The ordinance given first-reading approval Tuesday night allows sweetgrass basket makers to set up stands within buffers and rights of way if "the entity having jurisdiction over encroachments to the right-of-way extends permission."

The Sweetgrass Overlay District limits a sweetgrass basket stand to up to 500 square feet of covered area. Parking for the stands is required to be in an area farthest from the roadway, and the stands are required to have safe entry and exit.

Stokes-Marshall said the Legislature needs to address the issue of whether sweetgrass basket makers have to pay sales taxes. "I don't believe it's ever been resolved," she said. In 2005, sweetgrass basket making was designated the official state handcraft.

The Sweetgrass Basket Overlay District is the result of an effort involving the town, the county and the Highway 17 task force, which suggested a sweetgrass basket makers' district. The Task Force's only unanimous recommendation was to protect the tradition of selling sweetgrass baskets along U.S. 17 by having the county and the town create the special district.

The task force also recommended that the town and county pursue designation for original sweetgrass basket stands as state and federal historic sites. The town, the county and the Coastal Community Foundation in February entered a memorandum of agree-



ALAN HAWES/STAFF

The Lowcountry's sweetgrass basket-making tradition will be honored with a special overlay district.

ment to strengthen and preserve the integrity of historic neighborhoods along U.S. 17, which led to the Highway 17 Task Force.

The Sweetgrass Overlay District includes a 1.5 mile stretch of U.S. 17 from Long Point Road to Porcher's Bluff Road. Last week, County Council gave preliminary

approval to the Overlay District. The district includes other provisions, such as no more than three single-family homes per acre.

Experts said that 20 years ago it was thought that the main threat to sweetgrass basket makers was the decreasing supply of sweetgrass. That problem remains, but

development is now considered the larger threat to the tradition. Residential development cutting through historically black communities that have been in existence for three centuries is viewed as a bigger threat to the tradition's survival. The Sweetgrass Overlay District, by combining the

efforts of the town and county, is intended to help sweetgrass basket makers preserve their historic niche amid rapid development, officials said.

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