Reality Check 2.0

Collaborative Planning for Future Growth
Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Region | South Carolina

Guiding Principles, Barriers and Implementation Strategies

BCDCOG
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PLANNING, PARTNERSHIP & PROSPERITY

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Photos/Tony Tassarotti, City of North Charleston

A Collaborative Path Forward

On April 30, 2025, more than 150 local leaders from Berkeley, Charleston, and Dorchester Counties gathered for Reality Check 2.0, a collaborative planning exercise focused on how the region can accommodate growth through 2045. Using Lego blocks to represent the 102,000 new households—expected to bring 270,000 new residents—and 140,000 new jobs forecasted, participants worked together to strategically place the Lego blocks where that growth should occur. Yarn was used to illustrate new or expanded roadways, transit lines, and greenspace. The Guiding Principles, Barriers, and Implementation Strategies that emerged from the 15 facilitated table discussions were tested in real time through live polling at the event, then refined through additional analysis and an online survey of attendees conducted June 3–9, 2025. The result is a regional framework that channels the shared optimism of that day into action with principles that call for thoughtful growth, barriers that ground the vision in reality, and strategies that are practical and bold. Together, they will assist in turning the shared vision of Reality Check 2.0 of a thriving, connected, resilient region into reality.

Guiding Principles for Growth

These five guiding principles reflect the shared values and priorities identified by leaders from across the Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester region during Reality Check 2.0. Developed through facilitated discussions and collaborative planning among more than 150 participants from government, business, and nonprofit sectors, the principles are designed to accommodate growth with sensitivity, in balance with the existing enviroment, established communities and infrastructure, while embracing a thriving and sustainable future.

1. Plan Infrastructure and Growth for Long-Term Resilience

Guide growth toward locations already served by roads, utilities, and public facilities with existing or planned capacity. Aim to avoid areas where development would be costly, inefficient, or harmful to the environment and regional connectivity. Focus on land use patterns that reduce infrastructure costs, protect critical systems, and promote long-term environmental and economic resilience.

2. Expand Transportation Choices and Connectivity

Invest in a multimodal transportation network—bus rapid transit, bike and pedestrian infrastructure, connected roadways, and water-based transit—to link people to jobs, services, and each other.

3. Preserve Natural Landscapes and Community Character

Protect the region's natural landscape, communities, and culturally significant sites to safeguard its ecology, open spaces, and heritage while strengthening environmental and community resilience. Maintain regional connectivity through thoughtfully planned greenways and transportation corridors that respect and strengthen these assets rather than divide them.

4. Support Housing Choice in Connected, Mixed-Use Communities

Promote a variety of housing options affordable to all that includes mixed-income, missing middle, rental, and ownership, within walkable, mixed-use areas. Encourage adoption of zoning and land development standards that support greater density and create opportunities for transit oriented development and missing middle housing, two housing forms that are presently limited in the region. Prioritize housing that brings people closer to jobs, services, and opportunities while reducing commute times and infrastructure costs.

5. Coordinate Across Jurisdictions and Invest in Shared Understanding

Establish shared regional frameworks for growth, infrastructure, and conservation—while enabling local governments to tailor implementation to their community's needs. Build alignment by educating leaders, stakeholders, and the public on the long-term benefits of coordinated regional planning.

Barriers to Implementation

While the Reality Check 2.0 process surfaced strong regional consensus around how the Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester region should grow, participants also identified several recurring barriers that could hinder progress. These challenges—drawn from table discussions, policy ideas, and implementation feedback—reflect both structural constraints and political realities. Understanding and addressing these barriers will be essential to succeeding in turning shared priorities into action.

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1. Public Awareness and Resistance to Change

A lack of public awareness, engagement, or support was cited as a major barrier. Concerns about neighborhood change, housing density, and vocal NIMBY opposition make it difficult to implement housing, transit, and growth strategies—even when regional consensus exists.

2. Housing Affordability and Zoning Limitations

Rising costs, zoning restrictions, and limited housing diversity constrain the region's ability to provide affordable housing where residents do not have increased transportation costs. Local codes often discourage density, mixed-income, or missing middle housing near jobs and major corridors with existing and future transit services.

3. Aging and Insufficient Infrastructure

Growth is limited by outdated or overburdened infrastructure, including roads, utilities, stormwater, and sewer systems. Without reinvestment, these constraints will continue to push growth into less efficient, and less resilient areas.

4. Fragmented Regional Coordination

Jurisdictional silos and inconsistent planning across city and county lines undermine efforts to manage growth effectively. The absence of shared frameworks leads to gaps in infrastructure, housing, and mobility solutions.

5. Limited Funding and Fiscal Tools

The region's ability to invest in infrastructure, transit, and housing is often constrained by limited local funding, limited state-level coordination and authorization, and a lack of familiarity with public-private partnership opportunities.

6. Lack of Political Will and Short-Term Decision-Making

Without strong leadership and a willingness to take long-term action, important but complex solutions may stall in the face of short-term political pressures, risk aversion, or vocal opposition.

Implementation Strategies

Throughout the Reality Check 2.0 process, participants offered a range of ideas for how to move from vision to action. While barriers such as public resistance, zoning constraints, and infrastructure limitations were acknowledged, many tables also pointed toward practical steps to overcome them. The following strategies reflect the most common and actionable themes shared, offering a path forward to implementing shared growth priorities.

1. Build Regional Consensus Through Shared Frameworks

Encourage adoption of voluntary regional planning standards and coordination. Use shared data, performance metrics, and regional studies to help jurisdictions see themselves as part of a larger, connected region, while retaining local control.

2. Support Policy Leadership and Intergovernmental Dialogue

Convene regular forums that bring together elected officials, planners, and civic leaders to align on long-term goals. Equip local champions with messaging and materials to advocate for forward-looking solutions, even in the face of short-term political pressures.

3. Align Infrastructure Investment with Growth Priorities

Prioritize public infrastructure improvements (roads, sewer, stormwater, broadband) in areas designated for infill and corridor-based development. Use these investments to unlock development potential and improve access and efficiency.

4. Utilize Available Funding Tools and Build Capacity for Public-Private Partnerships

Maximize use of existing tools such as multi-county industrial parks (MCIPs) and tax increment financing (TIF) zones to support infrastructure aligned with regional growth. Strengthen understanding of public-private partnerships, explore new models for collaboration, and improve coordination with state partners to expand funding options and deliver complex projects.

5. Modernize Zoning and Land Use Tools

Update local zoning codes to allow for more diverse housing options, higher-density development in appropriate areas, and mixed-use centers near transit. Create model ordinances and toolkits to help municipalities act independently within a shared framework.

6. Educate and Engage the Public

Develop a regional campaign to build public understanding around the benefits of compact, connected development that offers a variety of housing options and supports vibrant, mixed-use communities that will accommodate forecasted growth. Use storytelling, visuals, and data to clarify how strategic growth enhances affordability, reduces congestion, and preserves the Lowcountry's character.

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Shaping our future together

Reality Check 2.0 brought together over 150 leaders from government, development, nonprofit, and business sectors to shape a shared vision for the region's future. What emerged was a collective willingness to work regionally and across sectors to plan for growth with purpose. The priorities outlined here were shaped through facilitated conversation, hands-on collaboration, and a shared desire to be more intentional in creating a connected, resilient, and thriving region. Now, we move forward together to turn that vision into action.

What's Next: From Consensus to Implementation

- **Release of the Full Report - August 2025:** A more detailed summary is in development, featuring quantitative data from the event and deeper analysis of participant feedback.

- **Regional Presentations:** Presentations will be scheduled with local councils, boards, and community organizations to share findings and support alignment across jurisdictions.

- **Partnership Development:** Ongoing coordination with regional stakeholders will help form partnerships to champion and implement the guiding principles and strategies.

- **Reality Check 2.1:** Regional partners will be regularly convened to align on shared priorities and identify early opportunities for implementation.

For more information, request a presentation or explore how to get involved, contact:
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Go to RealityCheckBCD.com
to stay up to date, get involved and access the event guide, interactive maps and data.