

A Vision for an
International Horse Park
in Aiken County



Commissioned by the Equine Support Council
of the Greater Aiken Chamber of Commerce

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Executive Summary

What is an International Horse Park?

An international horse park is a comprehensive, multi-use facility amenable to all equestrian competition-level activities from pleasure riding to driving to three-day eventing to barrel racing. The term "international" refers to the level of the facility and the level of competitions it will host, not necessarily the origin of the horses competing. An international horse park should be designed to meet Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) standards. The most well designed international horse parks are adaptable to be compatible with non-equine activities as well.

Why an International Horse Park?

Aiken County has been home to horses and equestrian disciplines for well over a century. It is an enduring legacy that continues to put Aiken in the spotlight with the horse community worldwide and with those who love the equestrian lifestyle. Building on this vital block of the local economy and culture and propelling it to a heightened position as a major industry will be an important step for economic growth and diversity in Aiken County. To this end an international caliber horse park will not only bring elite levels of competitors to this area across all disciplines, it will also give a boost to the current levels of equestrian competition in the area and strengthen demand for the existing facilities and events.

Where?

The ideal location for such a facility will be somewhere in the I-20 corridor close to but not in Aiken proper. Ease of access to the Interstate is essential for participants and equipment as well as for the efficient management of the anticipated spectators to horse park events.

Why a white paper?

The purpose of this white paper is to present a concept for the Aiken International Horse Park (AIHP) and to provide a snapshot of the Equine Support Council's discussions to date on this concept. White papers are often used to educate readers and help them think through the various issues related to a new or complex idea. This white paper is not intended to serve as a feasibility study on the economic viability of an international horse park but rather to present the concept and vision for the community's consideration before the next steps are taken.

Why the Chamber?

The equine industry is a thriving part of the economy of Aiken County and has the opportunity for unrivaled growth in the future if the AIHP is completed. The Greater Aiken Chamber of Commerce created the Equine Support Council (ESC) in 2009, currently with 150 members. The leading idea for ESC was to have individuals from the various equestrian disciplines join to investigate initiatives they can accomplish collectively that they are unable to do individually. The Chamber has worked with ESC to establish goals for the organization, and the creation of the AIHP is one of those. The equestrian industry does not exist in isolation from other parts of the community. The success of the AIHP will provide other Chamber members with additional business opportunities from competitors, visitors and from the horses they bring with them for events and competitions. The Greater Aiken Chamber of Commerce is interested in the economic success of its members and in the overall health of the community. That which is good for the community is good for the Chamber and its members. A healthy, happy community is good for business.

A vision for the region

The rapid growth of the equestrian economy in recent years provides an interesting opportunity for Aiken County which is explored more fully as a concept in this white paper. The creation of the Aiken International Horse Park is the opportunity to pull all of the equestrian disciplines together with a horse park as its epicenter.

The idea of an international horse park for Aiken County is not new. It was previously explored by the City of Aiken and was proposed as part of a recommendation of the Tourism Product Development Concept for the Scenic Savannah River Region (SSRR) for the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism in 2009.

The report prepared by Tourism Development International (TDI) of Dublin, Ireland, put the creation of the Aiken International Horse Park (AIHP) as the centerpiece for a resurgence of tourism in the SSRR, a group of nine counties along the Savannah River in central South Carolina.

The TDI report notes that there are "no major visitor attractions in the Aiken area that 1. harnesses its standing as a major equestrian activity destination and 2. broadens the appeal of the area to different market segments."

It recommended as its first priority the creation of an international horse park to boost tourism in the Aiken area and to establish Aiken as the hub for the clusters of attractions that will be established in the other counties of the SSRR.

"Aiken will be established as the capital of the South Carolina equestrian corridor and boost the state's reputation as a premier area for horse-based activities," the report states.

According to the TDI report, "The AIHP would fulfill the following project objectives:

- To provide a competition and events center of international standard that would unify many of the equestrian disciplines in the Aiken and North Augusta area;
- To provide public access to horse riding facilities and to expand visitor knowledge of the equestrian disciplines;
- To help increase the visitor levels and investment in the Aiken area by attracting new equestrian competitions and events;
- To provide an equestrian center that complements the facilities elsewhere in Aiken and South Carolina and that would improve upon some of the issues noted with similar facilities elsewhere such as inadequate parking, horse stabling and ancillary amount, and
- To provide a major focal point in South Carolina's equestrian corridor, to reinforce Aiken's standing as the capital of the State's equine sector and to strengthen South Carolina's claim to be a premier center for horse-based activities and events."

The TDI report utilizes Aiken as its center for the tourism efforts in the SSRR and suggests that if the AIHP and other aspects of its report come to fruition, tourism dollars in the SSRR could double or triple, bringing in \$500 million annually to the region.

Horse Park Benefits for Aiken and Aiken County

Creating an international horse park in Aiken County is a solution to the economic dilemma of a diverse equestrian community. Such a park would bring additional popularity to the Aiken County area through tourism and the historic identity of Aiken with the equestrian community. It would also be a focal point for the equestrian industry in Aiken County, now hidden behind fence rails along rural roads or unpaved streets.

With the creation of the AIHP, millions of tourist dollars and thousands of jobs could be potentially brought into a rural portion of the county, boosting the local economy from the hospitality offerings to grocery stores, from feed shops to tack stores to the ancillary services required to support a major venue for equestrian events.

A formula for the economic impact of just one event at the AIHP shows the potential impact on the local economy. Multiplying the number of horses entered in an event times 3.5 (the number of people who typically are brought to a show per horse) times the number of days of the event times \$150 (the amount spent per person per day) gives the grand total of the money that will come in from a single event. A competition with 200 horses that lasts three days would bring \$315,000 to the local economy.

Early conversations with professionals across various disciplines have served as positive encouragement and given an indication of the potential demand for an equestrian facility that would host significant national and international competitions. This would indicate an opportunity to put Aiken on the map for horse events in a way that has not been envisioned before. While Lexington, KY, and Ocala, FL, have been central sites for such competitions in the past, Aiken offers a unique set of features that make it attractive for such a mission.

1. Aiken County has an abundance of open rural land and a natural sandy-clay soil that provides excellent footing for horses. This feature has drawn many horse owners to the area in recent years.
2. Aiken County has a history with horses that provides it with name recognition in the equestrian world.
3. Aiken County is positioned well geographically – between New York City and southern Florida.
4. Aiken County has a climate conducive to equestrian competitions year-round.
5. Aiken County is well situated for transporting horses and visitors into the area. Interstate 20 cuts through the northern part of Aiken County and easily connects this area to Columbia and Charlotte to the east and Augusta and Atlanta to the west.

The Scope of the International Horse Park

The Aiken International Horse Park would provide venues for competition in a number of equestrian-related fields. Currently, Aiken County is home to dressage, polo, hunters, jumpers, three-day eventers, driving, endurance riding, barrel racing, cutting, roping, penning, team penning, rodeo, competitive trail riding polo, cross country, and pleasure trail riding. Most or all of these could make use of the facilities of the AIHP. The scope of the facility should take into consideration the following:

1. The AIHP will require 600 to 1,000 acres or more. The ideal location would be along Interstate 20 several miles north of Aiken in a rural part of Aiken County. The proximity to an interstate exit makes it easily accessible to event participants and spectators alike. The acreage should also allow space for future growth.
2. The AIHP should be designed in such a way that it can be built in stages as resources become available and to meet Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) standards. The AIHP will consist of a number of arenas both covered and uncovered with one large, multi-purpose covered/enclosed arena that can be used for horse-related events as well as other entertainment opportunities such as concerts and sporting events. This covered arena will hold 15,000 to 20,000 spectators for world-class events.
3. While the ability to offer non-equine events could be an additional stream of revenue, the priority should be given to equestrian events. A local example of this model would be the USCA Convocation Center in which a priority is given to athletic events but other non-USCA athletic events can be held at the facility on a space available basis.
4. A signature structure will be part of the AIHP making a statement about the importance of the facility to the local community and the equestrian world. The signature building will be architecturally striking. It will house offices of the AIHP staff but also could potentially be home to an interactive museum experience about horses and their history in the Aiken area as well as a Visitor Center location for Aiken County. This would allow the facility to promote Aiken's rich equestrian heritage and encourage visitors to visit businesses in other parts of the City of Aiken and Aiken County.
5. The AIHP will be laid out so that commercial development (hotels, restaurants, equestrian-related shops) can be developed in association with it. This development should be strategic in nature to ensure and protect the aesthetic value of the horse park.
6. The AIHP will have permanent barns and stalls to accommodate horses participating in events as well as facilities for temporary stalls when required.
7. The AIHP will have parking lots, proper walkways and restrooms adequate for the visitors who will come to the center for equestrian and other events with easy access to the arenas.
8. The AIHP will have substantial facilities for RV, camper and trailer parking along with adequate water/electric/disposal hookups for those using these vehicles.
9. The AIHP should have meeting rooms for workshop sessions as well as food service areas to meet catering and concession needs.

10. An emergency veterinarian facility should be considered with possible collaborations with vet schools in the region. Quarantine facilities may also be necessary for international horses.
11. Local and international show managers, trainers, riders, grooms, etc. should be involved in the design considerations for the facility.
12. Footing considerations for the facility should be at an exceptionally high level.

Incorporation of a Trail system

A system of riding trails will be incorporated with the AIHP, potentially connecting it to a network of hundreds of miles of horse trails already identified in Aiken County. The riding trails will enhance the AIHP as a destination not only for specialized competitions but also for recreational riders who would take advantage of the varied topography of Aiken County for their enjoyment. A committee is currently working on plans to identify trails that could become part of a countywide network. The trail system, when completed, could form a three-point network connecting the AIHP in the center with Hitchcock Woods at one end and Aiken State Natural Area at the other. With the AIHP at the center, the business generated from visiting riders at the commercial areas of the AIHP could be considerable.

Priority given to green construction

With a growing emphasis on energy efficiency and green construction, the AIHP will be developed to be as green a site as possible. Construction methods with enhanced green technologies will be utilized with the potential for solar, geothermal, wind and even bio fuels from the animal waste removed from the stable areas. Cooperative efforts between the AIHP and the Savannah River National Laboratory, Savannah River Site and local colleges and universities may be possible that will encourage even greater energy saving and may provide unique opportunities for green construction and energy conservation at the facility. With green technology in place there could be an opportunity for ongoing research projects of best environmental and energy practices. AIHP could become a working laboratory for college students and companies, enhancing its position not only for equestrian events but also for scientific study.

The target will be for the AIHP to be energy self-sufficient. Using its collaborations the AIHP can become a national model for conservation and green development.

Who's in charge?

Because of the unusual nature of the AIHP as a multi-discipline facility, the ownership question is important for investors. It is not the intent or desire of the Greater Aiken Chamber of Commerce to own the AIHP. Some possibilities for the AIHP venture could include the following:

- 1) PRIVATE/PUBLIC EFFORT: The AIHP could be under the joint ownership of Aiken County and/or the City of Aiken and then leased to a private foundation to be managed. Other combined efforts of governmental and private support could be pursued.

- 2) PRIVATE FOUNDATION: A privately owned foundation could be created to own and operate the facility.
- 3) PRIVATE FOR-PROFIT OWNERSHIP: A private owner/developer could utilize the horse park and its environs to provide the real estate for AIHP and intertwine additional private development in and around the park.

It is anticipated that the majority of equestrian events and non-equestrian events will be brought to the facility by promoters rather than being put on by the AIHP.

Cash, check or credit card?

The cost of such an endeavor is substantial. The full price tag of the AIHP is unknown. Initial land purchase, land preparation and the cost of building facilities have not yet been determined. But all this would be substantial running well into the millions of dollars. Even if built in stages, the AIHP would prove to be a significant financial investment.

There is a possibility of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) funding for part of the financing. Through the Community Facilities Program of USDA there is the possibility of direct and guaranteed loans. No grants from USDA are available. With the federal budget concerns and national debt considerations being debated in Congress, The AIHP cannot count on federal dollars as a sole investment model. However, with the pursuit of green technologies to be utilized at the horse park, there is a possibility that the AIHP could qualify for energy grants to pursue that portion of the project. State support seems unlikely with the budget situation the General Assembly is facing this year. Aiken County and the City of Aiken, which are very interested in preserving green space, may be likely candidates as partners. With funds set aside for green space through the local 1-cent sales tax, there is the potential for the County and City to make an investment in green space at the AIHP and lease it to the governing body of the horse park. There may be other ways to partner with these two entities that would promote the goals of the AIHP and the two governing bodies.

The most likely answer to funding the AIHP is through private investment. Investors, though, would have to be aware of the risks and the potential for rewards in order to put so much money into the AIHP project. There would also have to be a showing of strong support throughout the local business community, the leadership of Aiken County and in the local equestrian community. Investors might balk at a project unless there is substantial support from the local community. Strong community support for the AIHP is essential in order to gather the investors and financial resources needed to turn this concept into a reality.

Challenges

The vision of the AIHP is not without challenges and it is appropriate to give voice to the concerns that have been raised over the impact of such a facility on what presently exists in Aiken County. These concerns should be give priority in the feasibility study.

Don't tread on me

The intent of the AIHP would be to attract the highest level of competitive events in the equestrian disciplines. Just as polo continues to flourish at Whitney Field in spite of the

introduction of new facilities outside the Aiken city limits, the AIHP would not be a competitor for events currently held here but would look beyond to attract national and world-class events. Existing competitions could be enhanced by the presence of world caliber riders actually contributing to the success of the events currently being held in the area.

The AIHP is not being designed with the idea of taking away from the individual investments and sacrifices that have been made by the pioneers of the equestrian community over the past several decades. The showcase events that have been nurtured for years should actually benefit from the proximity to an equestrian center for international caliber competitors. Many will want to train on existing facilities in Aiken County near the site of their competitions. Participants at the existing venues will have added reason to wish to compete so close to world class competition.

Don't Take Our Heritage for Granted

The AIHP should have a positive impact on the Horse District of Aiken, Hitchcock Woods and nearby equestrian venues. The Aiken Triple Crown, training facilities, horse shows like the Show in the Woods, etc., will continue to operate as they have. The AIHP should enhance the traditional horse events of Aiken by bringing the focus of the equestrian world to Aiken County, not by competing with them. Protecting Aiken's equestrian history and heritage is a vital concern of the Equine Support Council. Equally important is to grow the equestrian industry and initiatives such as the AIHP would seek to balance the history and charm of the Horse District and downtown with expanded opportunities for business and tourism.

Growing Aiken's equestrian industry should benefit both the City of Aiken and Aiken County. This growth would be seen in opportunities for new or expanded equestrian-related businesses as well as additional visitors to our area to benefit businesses including shopping, dining and lodging.

Other Concerns Raised that the Feasibility Study Could Address

- The need for the facility and its economic impact are not clear at this point and must be thoroughly addressed in a feasibility study.
- Concerns about access issues with the current state of the roads on the northern side of Aiken County should be addressed.
- Zoning issues to meet the AIHP requirements as well potential development surrounding the AIHP should be explored.
- The potential impact (both positive and negative) of the AIHP on local equestrian venues should be addressed.
- Plans to visit and learn from other horse parks around the country should be put into place before proceeding too quickly.
- Discussions should occur on how to balance facility use among the various disciplines. For example, there is a concern that each discipline will want their own space.
- A potential timeline for progressing to international-level events should be developed.
- The availability of possible event dates should be explored with sanctioned equestrian organizations.
- Feasibility study should address the questions: "Why spend money on horses in this economic climate?" and "Are we creating new income or dividing current funds another way?"

What's next?

If a decision is made to pursue the AIHP, a feasibility study should be solicited as soon as possible to determine if the project is viable and will have the desired impact on Aiken County's economy.

- The feasibility study should be comprehensive and performed by an organization/company whose findings will be credible to potential investors.
- The feasibility study should explore possible dates and types for high caliber equestrian events that could be hosted at the facility.
- Depending upon the results of the feasibility study, a 501 (c-3), not-for-profit organization, should be established for AIHP and the following steps could be taken:
 - An advisory board for the AIHP should be created.
 - A comprehensive fund-raising plan must be completed.
 - Phase I of the construction plan will begin.
 - Funding/matching funding should be sought from sources both inside and outside the community to help pay for the feasibility study.
 - The site for the AIHP should be decided upon, and efforts should begin to acquire the identified property.
 - A core of individuals consisting of site preparation, architectural, environmental and discipline consultants should be identified and brought together to help define a plan for the AIHP.
 - Application should be made to USDA for major funding.

APPENDIX A

An overview: Horses and Aiken County

History

Winter Colony

Good weather and solid footing are essential for an area to be seen as ideal for equestrian activities. Good footing for horses is a requirement in virtually every activity that horses and their riders undertake. Aiken County has reasonably good weather year round and the firm footing needed for horse activities.

Because of the favorable climate and exceptional footing, Aiken County became a prominent Winter Colony for wealthy families from the North in the late 19th century. They came to Aiken because of the pleasant winter weather and the ease of travel by rail from the Northeast.

The Winter Colonists built large homes and established fine estates, adding a luster to Aiken that was unique among Southern towns its size.

The Winter Colony residents brought their recreational activities including horseback riding and other activities involving horses. They brought teams of horses and fine carriages, parading them to parties and social events with their friends.

Polo was first played in Aiken in the 1880s. The Sport of Kings has been played here continuously since, and some of the local fields date back more than a century.

Fox hunting took place in the pine woods near town, a sport that continues into the 21st century with both live and drag hunts.

Equestrian activities became such a part of Aiken that one Winter Colony family, the Hitchcocks, purchased large tracts of land for horseback activities and left the land in trust for use by the people of Aiken. Hitchcock Woods with its 2,200 acres is not only the largest urban forest in the United States, but it is also covered with miles of trails for horseback riders, hikers, joggers and nature lovers alike.

After the heyday of the Winter Colony, Aiken never lost its affinity for horses, and those familiar with the town continued to perceive this as an exceptional site for horse related activities.

Thoroughbreds and more

Recognizing the pleasant weather and excellent footing for the most athletic of horses, the Thoroughbred, Winter Colony members and their friends began to see Aiken as a perfect spot for wintering these animals and providing them important training prior to the spring and summer racing seasons.

The Aiken Training Track was established to provide a single place within the city limits for a number of stables to train their best. Triple Crown winners – the most elite of Thoroughbred horses – have been trained in Aiken as have other champion racers.

At the same time that polo flourished and the Thoroughbred racing industry grew, harness racing also took seed in Aiken. The Aiken Mile Track (now McGhee's' Mile Track) was set up for the purpose of training trotters and pacers. The best of these went to the circuits of the Midwest where summer fairs just wouldn't be complete without sulky races.

The professional events for harness and Thoroughbred races always got the headlines and made the highlight reels. But owners and trainers recognized the need to thank the community where the difficult training took place, and to that end came up with events to showcase the efforts of each winter.

Aiken's 'Triple Crown' Events

The horse is celebrated not only by equestrians, but by the public at large in Aiken. Each spring on consecutive Saturdays the events that combine to form Aiken's Triple Crown are held in front of thousands of spectators. The horse and horse events continue to play a significant part in the social life of Aiken County.

The Aiken Trials was established in 1942 and is the first leg of Aiken's Triple Crown held each spring. At the Trials, locally trained Thoroughbreds are tested in a race-day environment and many get their first taste for the feel of the starting gate, the sound of the crowds and the rush of running beneath the finish line ahead of their competitors.

Following the Trials is the Aiken Spring Steeplechase a week later. More than 30,000 dressed in their spring finest go to Ford Conger Field for this seasonal gala to watch and to be watched. Primary to this is the racing by steeplechasers that go around the course and over the jumps as part of a professional steeplechase circuit.

Polo is now played on the third week of Aiken Triple Crown at Powderhouse Field situated adjacent to both Ford Conger Field and the Aiken Training Track. Polo with its more than 125 years of consecutive play in this community is a fitting conclusion to three weeks of events that show off only a part of the equestrian community's offerings in Aiken County.

Whether horse owners, those who have ridden only on occasion or those who wouldn't know the withers from a fetlock, people of all backgrounds recognize the Aiken Triple Crown as a rite of spring. And they recognize the horse as a singular symbol of Aiken. It is unimaginable to think of Aiken's history without considerable mention of horses. Even the street signs in Aiken have a picture of a horse's head. While the two are always linked historically, what about the future?

Today

A new era

The city of Aiken is not alone in providing a home for horse and horse events in this area. Greater Aiken County has become a magnet for horsemen from a variety of equestrian disciplines in the past two decades.

High land prices, rising taxes and urban sprawl in Florida and California have caused horse owners there to look elsewhere for housing and training their animals. Many have looked to

Aiken County, its abundance of quality land, fair prices, low taxes and equestrian history as a place to relocate.

The sport of polo was once again a springboard for equestrian development. Some of the top players in American polo saw Aiken County as an excellent spot to raise and train their animals. In the latter part of the 20th century polo farms sprouted up around Aiken County, particularly in the eastern S.C. 302 corridor. Along with the polo farms and ponies, several new polo fields were built, including some that entertained high goal polo events.

In addition to the resurgence of polo, a new breed of equestrians to Aiken County began arriving quietly. Farms for eventing and other competitive equine disciplines began to be established, complete with courses for competition. Seemingly overnight, this new variety of equestrians to Aiken County brought an expanded dimension to the term "horse community."

To the western side of the county, the equestrian industry has taken a different shape. The Hippodrome in North Augusta is the site of a number of horse related events each year with stabling facilities available for those bringing their animals to compete. Some of these events, like The Futurity, occur in Augusta, but Aiken County still benefits from the exposure and from the economic impact of goods and services from local businesses.

Big business

The horse industry is big business in Aiken County. According to a survey provided by the state, Aiken County has the largest horse population in South Carolina with an estimated 6,785 animals now residing in the county.

A 2008 economic impact survey conducted by Dr. Sanela Porca and Dr. J. Ralph Byington of the University of South Carolina Aiken School of Business shows the horse industry countywide generates \$71.82 million per year in gross receipts including direct, indirect and induced effects on the local economy.

- The study showed that the equivalent of 1,814 full-time jobs were directly or indirectly attributed to the horse industry in Aiken County.
- The Porca-Byington report also showed a total impact of \$19.25 million annually on household incomes in Aiken County because of the horse industry.
- In terms of a multiplier effect, \$1 of spending by the horse industry leads to \$1.65 of spending in the local economy.
- The value of the animals in the Aiken County equine industry surpasses \$59 million.

All of this shows the presence of a large, healthy and vibrant industry that needs only another catalyst to propel it to new heights. The catalyst that can do just that is an international horse park.

Every horse farm is a business entity of its own, providing jobs for those who ride and care for horses, those who provide essential services like veterinary, feed and shoeing as well as the providers of ancillary services. Individually each is a small business; collectively they make a great economic impact on Aiken County. With a concerted effort on the part of the equine industry, the proposal of an international horse park can be a realization that benefits all.

In addition, there are a number of significant equestrian events on the national level that would be amenable to finding a new home. Aiken with its horse history and equestrian economy would be a welcomed site for just such competitions.

The future

Tomorrow's economy

Aiken County's reliance on the Savannah River Site as an economic engine is possibly in for a change in the years to come. Closure of certain areas at SRS is more the rule than the exception. New missions, in light of budget constraints, may well be hard to come by in future years. Aiken County must look to other areas to bolster its future economy. The equestrian industry is one area that is ripe for growth with the capacity for additional investments and jobs. It could be one of the many components needed to diversify the economy of Aiken County.

A unified equestrian industry that gets its strength through combining the power of numerous individual enterprises could become one of Aiken County's primary economic forces. Presently the farms and equestrian facilities that make up the horse industry in Aiken County are each individual businesses. Working together these small businesses from numerous equestrian disciplines can become a powerful economic force felt throughout the state and beyond. The full power of this unified front has not yet reached its potential.

Combining members from all the equestrian disciplines to produce a stronger business impact in Aiken County is the impetus that can propel the idea of a horse park from a suggestion to reality.

This equestrian industry, which brings so many to Aiken County for riding competitions, polo and even the events of Aiken's Triple Crown, can be a tool to help market Aiken and the surrounding area to a new generation of visitors who will be a ready source of customers for local businesses.

APPENDIX B

Horses: An economic challenge

Aiken County industry

A proud community

Aiken County has been noted since its creation for the strong work ethic of its people and for the notable industries that have made their homes in the area. William Gregg established the textile halls of the Graniteville Company even before Aiken County was created. He used state-of-the-art technology and a philosophy of caring for his workers and their families to establish a textile dynasty in Aiken County.

Other textile firms also set up shop in Aiken County, mostly along the Horse Creek Valley. Thousands of people made their livelihoods in the mills, and generations of Aiken County residents supported themselves in the mills and associated industries.

In the early 1950s the U.S. government scrutinized Aiken County and determined it to be the best site for a nuclear materials production facility. Around 300,000 acres of land in Aiken, Barnwell and Allendale counties was set aside for what is now the Savannah River Site (SRS).

For more than 40 years, reactors produced fissionable material for use in this country's nuclear weapons program. The facility and its workers were recognized as among those who helped the United States win the Cold War.

SRS now supports around 13,000 workers, many of whom are dedicated to projects of closure and cleanup.

Other industries have come into the county, including ones that produce glass fiber yarn, automobile tires, consumer pharmaceutical products, baked goods, diesel engines and many more. Aiken County is well diversified in its present economy.

Planning for the future

While there is diversification in the local economy, the county and its leaders must learn lessons from the past and apply them to the future. The leadership of Aiken County, especially its business community, cannot allow the county to rest on the laurels of past success and expect that the status quo will be sufficient for tomorrow's needs. As history has shown, the status quo exists until a paradigm shift or outside forces dictate otherwise. Aiken County cannot rely on the textile industry or even the idea of new missions for SRS to anchor the full economic hope of the future. Leaders must look for new and unexpected sources to drive the local economy.

The textile industry that served Aiken County so well for more than a century has withered to the point that it is a minor player in the 21st century equation of the county's economy. Where thousands once held textile jobs in Aiken County, that number is now counted in the hundreds. Buildings that once produced cloth have been torn down, left empty or converted to other uses.

SRS with its thousands of technical jobs and its expertise in the world of nuclear science has proven to be susceptible to the budget knife. Layoffs of up to 1,400 people are taking place in 2011 by the M and O contractor at SRS. Talks in Washington, DC, over cuts in the federal budget may further impact the job situation at the Site into the future. Local leaders are doing all in their power to push for new missions at SRS with some success.

Other industries feel impacts of corporate decisions and the natural ebb and flow of the business cycle. While Aiken County has a strong Economic Development recruitment organization that is constantly courting new industries, there is always more that can be done locally to ensure the control of the economic future of the county.

And horses?

The rapid growth of the equestrian economy in recent years brings both risks and opportunities for Aiken County. There is the risk that this industry, fragmented into dozens of individual enterprises, may not be recognized for the major economic factor that it is. There is the risk that this industry may vanish before Aiken County leaders have a chance to propel the equestrian industry into a role as a major force in the local economy.

There is the opportunity to pull all of the equestrian disciplines together into a viable industry that is greater than the sum of its individual parts. With all of the many disciplines represented in Aiken County working for the benefit of the equestrian industry as a whole, there is the potential for a major industry to develop with a horse park as its epicenter.