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National health company exits Charleston

By Patrick Hoff
phoff@scbiznews.com

At the end of March, Ben Leedle stood before an energetic crowd of Charleston residents packed into The Schoolhouse in West Ashley and announced that Blue Zones LLC, a community wellness program, had deemed the city ready to embark on a five-year project to improve the health

of the city.

The only issue was an undisclosed amount of funding, which had yet to be secured.

Six months later, everything had changed. Community members seemed more uncertain and potential funders of the project were on the fence when Leedle, the CEO of Blue Zones, returned for further discussion of the initiative at Charles Towne Landing.

Dan Buettner, who founded the for-profit

company and said he's normally not involved with business aspects of projects, did the talking.

A Blue Zones Project "only works ... if the private sector and the public sector both want it and there's an appetite for innovation," Buettner said at the time.

He added, "I'm not sure if this community

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The Lowcountry manufacturing sector needs up to 500 more local graduates each year to fill openings at companies like Mercedes-Benz Vans in Ladson, which is currently trying to hire hundreds of workers. (Photo/Kim McManus)

FILLING THE GAPS

An expected 35,000 new jobs in the Charleston region in the next five years will add more pressure to companies already struggling to fill existing openings. Business leaders are advocating for more apprenticeships and certification programs to avoid costly out-of-state recruitment.

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Decade-old I-526 project back on again

By Liz Segrist
lsegrist@scbiznews.com

Interstate 526 is back on the table after a 5-2 vote by the S.C. Transportation Infrastructure Bank to revive the project, which has been on again, off again for more than a decade.

The vote at the recent SIB board meeting means the \$420 million set aside in 2006 remains designated for the 526 project, and Charleston County is still on the hook for coming up with the remaining funding needed to build out the highway.

The county and the S.C. Department of Transportation will negotiate a new contract within 45 days of the vote, putting the deadline in mid-November.

The plan calls for extending the Mark Clark Expressway about 8 miles from West Ashley, where it currently terminates at U.S. Highway 17, onto Johns Island and continuing over to James Island near James Island County Park.

Since the 1980s, when the interstate first opened, people have debated continuation of the road's construction.

Sen. Hugh Leatherman, a Florence Republican who sits on the bank board and voted

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CHARLESTON UNDER CONSTRUCTION

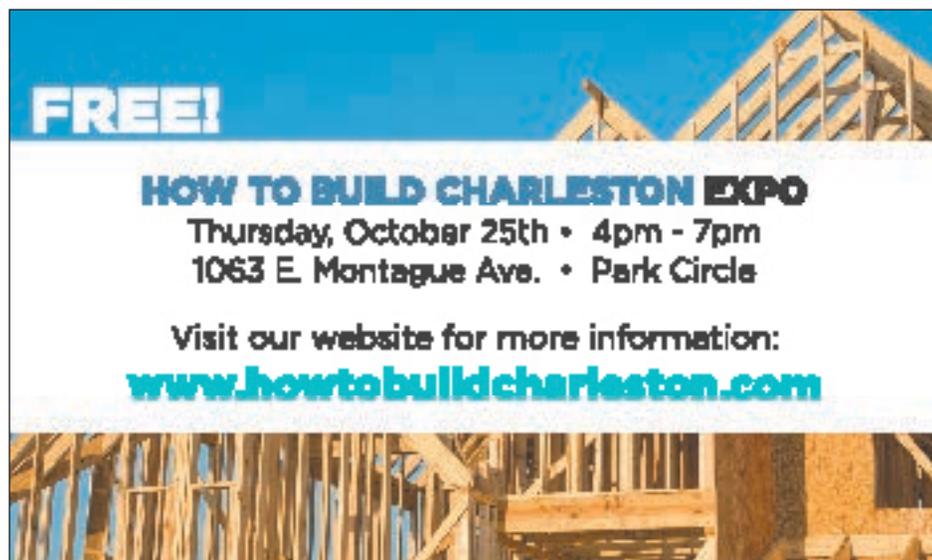
Who is building what in the Charleston area?
Projects, companies, prices, projected timelines, photos and stories.

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BLUE ZONES, from Page 1 ►

is right for a Blue Zone, quite honestly.”

Later that day, the city of Charleston announced that its exploration of the Blue Zones Project had ended. Less than 50% of the \$10 million required had been secured from donors such as health care systems and local nonprofits.

“We didn’t have a complement of organizations who could make the investment in Blue Zones,” said Anton Gunn, executive director of community health innovation and chief diversity officer at MUSC and chair of Charleston’s health and wellness advisory committee.

Blue Zones LLC is based on research Buettner did for National Geographic on five places in the world where people live the longest, which he deemed blue zones. Buettner and his company take concepts from the blue zones and apply them to cities across the United States, called Blue Zones Projects.

Buettner said in an interview that Charleston probably was a good place for a Blue Zones Project, but he said a piece of Blue Zones’ success depends on local media being on board; he said coverage of the project in The Post and Courier was “the thing that killed” the Blue Zones Project in Charleston. None of the coverage was inaccurate, he said, but the way it was framed was unfair.

“You can describe your spouse and talk about her most beautiful features and make her sound fabulous, or you can talk about your spouse and describe her least attractive features and make her sound awful,” Buettner said. “You’re not lying and you’re reporting the facts in both cases, but in this case, they dug pretty deep to find the negative stuff and most of the most important positive things ... was vastly underreported.”

Mitch Pugh, executive editor of The Post and Courier, said reporter Lauren Sausser set out to find out how successful Blue Zones had been, knowing that projects had been rolled out in almost 40 communities; he said he stands by her reporting.

“I think what she found in her reporting and demonstrated through her reporting was that the results were mixed,” he said. “And I think if you read the story with an open mind, that’s what the story says. And I think it was fair, accurate, responsible reporting.”

Susan Johnson, director of health promotion at the Medical University of South Carolina and a member of the Blue Zones steering committee in Charleston, said she was disappointed in the newspaper’s coverage and said the steering committee felt the coverage contributed to people misunderstanding the project.

“I was really disappointed to see how The Post and Courier kind of dismantled the Blue Zone Project and focused on the fact that Blue Zones is a for-profit company, because I think that is so shortsighted,” she said. “They (Blue Zones LLC) can

do a whole lot more by partnering with for-profit companies that are trying to do good things. Their business model is dependent on them being successful.”

Buettner said if a Blue Zones Project doesn’t meet certain benchmarks, Blue Zones LLC stands to lose 25% of its funding, which would account for the company’s profit.

Buettner said he feels like the company is more effective because it’s a for-profit and doesn’t have to raise funds like a nonprofit would.

“I don’t believe in the hat-in-hand approach,” he said. “I believe you find enterprising people who want to work hard with values, and if you create a value, you get paid for that value.”

‘Mixed at best’

A Blue Zones Project in Charleston would have required \$10 million over five years, which is less than the \$25 million paid in Fort Worth, Texas, but more than Beach Cities Health District in California — a public health agency serving Hermosa Beach, Manhattan Beach and Redondo Beach — put into the project. According to public budget documents, Beach Cities Health District spent \$1.8 million on the initiative over a three-year period with an additional \$3.5 million from outside funding.

Blue Zones typically doesn’t take money from municipalities, instead relying on private donors, such as hospital systems, foundations or large companies in the region, to pay for the wellness initiative. The cost of the Blue Zone Project goes into hiring local staff and setting up the infrastructure to organize.

“It would be inappropriate and historic for a municipality to own all of those costs of doing a Blue Zone,” Gunn, chair of the health and wellness advisory committee, said, because of the range of the project and the total cost.

Gunn said Roper St. Francis Healthcare, Blue Cross Blue Shield of South Carolina, MUSC and Boeing were some of the sponsors approached in Charleston, but “the conversation in the room was mixed at best” when the plug was pulled, he said.

“We had a roughly hourlong meeting with all of those corporate partners and health systems, and we learned several things about the different challenges that each organization is having, not necessarily supporting the Blue Zones but they have other competing priorities that are happening at the same time,” Gunn said.

He added that none of the potential sponsors cited The Post and Courier’s coverage as a reason for not providing funding.

Mark Dickson, vice president of the mission department at Roper St. Francis Healthcare, said Roper was one of the sponsors of Blue Zones’ sites visits to Charleston when the company was evaluating the city; he said the concept is great, but in the end, the health care

system wasn't sure Blue Zones was right for Charleston.

"We love the idea, we really enjoyed the exploration of what they're about and all," Dickson said. "But the more we looked into it, the more we were saying to ourselves, 'Well, we're already doing that in a lot of different ways.'"

Another concern, he said, was that a Blue Zones Project would be focused on the city of Charleston; everything Roper St. Francis does has a tri-county focus.

"We can just learn and build on what we're already doing," Dickson said. "We just didn't want to commit millions of dollars to a for-profit consulting group to basically come in and direct things or tell us more of what we're already doing."

City spokesman Jack O'Toole said in a statement that the lessons learned from exploring the Blue Zones Project will be applied in the development of other wellness initiatives in the future.

"Everyone involved would like to thank Blue Zones for helping us to better understand their communitywide approach to wellness, and for all the time they've shared with local stakeholders over the past several months," he said.

Moving forward

Gunn and other members of Charleston's health and wellness advisory committee said they're not giving up on a Charleston Blue Zones Project at some point.

"I'm an eternal optimist about lots of things," Gunn said. "'No' right now doesn't mean 'no' forever, and 'no' right now might mean 'no' because of the information and the position that I'm in right now. New information, new day, the decision might be different."

Gunn said looking back, the committee could have done a better job of engaging potential sponsors and partners and having more intensive conversations with them.

"It's not anybody's fault, other than it's just the nature of doing big things," Gunn said.

The committee is preparing a set of priorities for 2019, which — based on ideas discussed at a meeting earlier this month — may include opioid abuse prevention; children's health; and the mental health of firefighters, police officers and veterans.

Buettner said he thinks Charleston has the capacity to do something akin to a Blue Zone on its own, but Johnson, of MUSC, said she doesn't think that's the case.

"We have a lot of great things that are going on in silos," Johnson said. "And there's a lot of competition among those different groups that are doing great work, but they're not doing it in coordination to really get that collective impact that you see in Blue Zone communities."

Dickson, of Roper St. Francis, said he cringes when he hears the term "silo" because it comes up a lot and it's some-

thing that the region needs to work on.

"I think our challenge now is to break down those silos on our own," Dickson said.

Current efforts

One program already trying to unify wellness initiatives in the Lowcountry is Healthy Tri-County, an effort led by Trident United Way, MUSC and Roper St. Francis.

The program was born in January 2017 out of community needs assessments that, as a nonprofit health care system, Roper is required to perform every three years as part of the Affordable Care Act. Roper received help on the assessment from Trident United Way in 2016, and later, MUSC came on board.

"We just felt that as these three core partners, or as these three agencies in the community, that we were well-positioned to do something much bigger and start to, in a really systematic way, bring those community partners together," said Kellye McKenzie, Trident United Way's director of health.

Healthy Tri-County was formed to bring community wellness partners to the table to make connections, share resources and make sure efforts aren't being duplicated.

The joint project has several workgroups focused on different areas of wellness in the community, and at the end of October, a report is being released that outlines how to improve health in Berkeley, Charleston and Dorchester counties.

"At that point, we'll transition into full-blown action," McKenzie said. "And we have the plan structured such that it has very tangible action that practitioners can take, as well as a different set of recommendations or actions that an everyday community member can take."

McKenzie said Roper St. Francis and MUSC have committed to financially supporting Healthy Tri-County and the efforts outlined in the upcoming report through 2023.

People have drawn comparisons between Healthy Tri-County and the Blue Zones Project, McKenzie said, and the partners at Healthy Tri-County think Blue Zones would have been a great opportunity for the region.

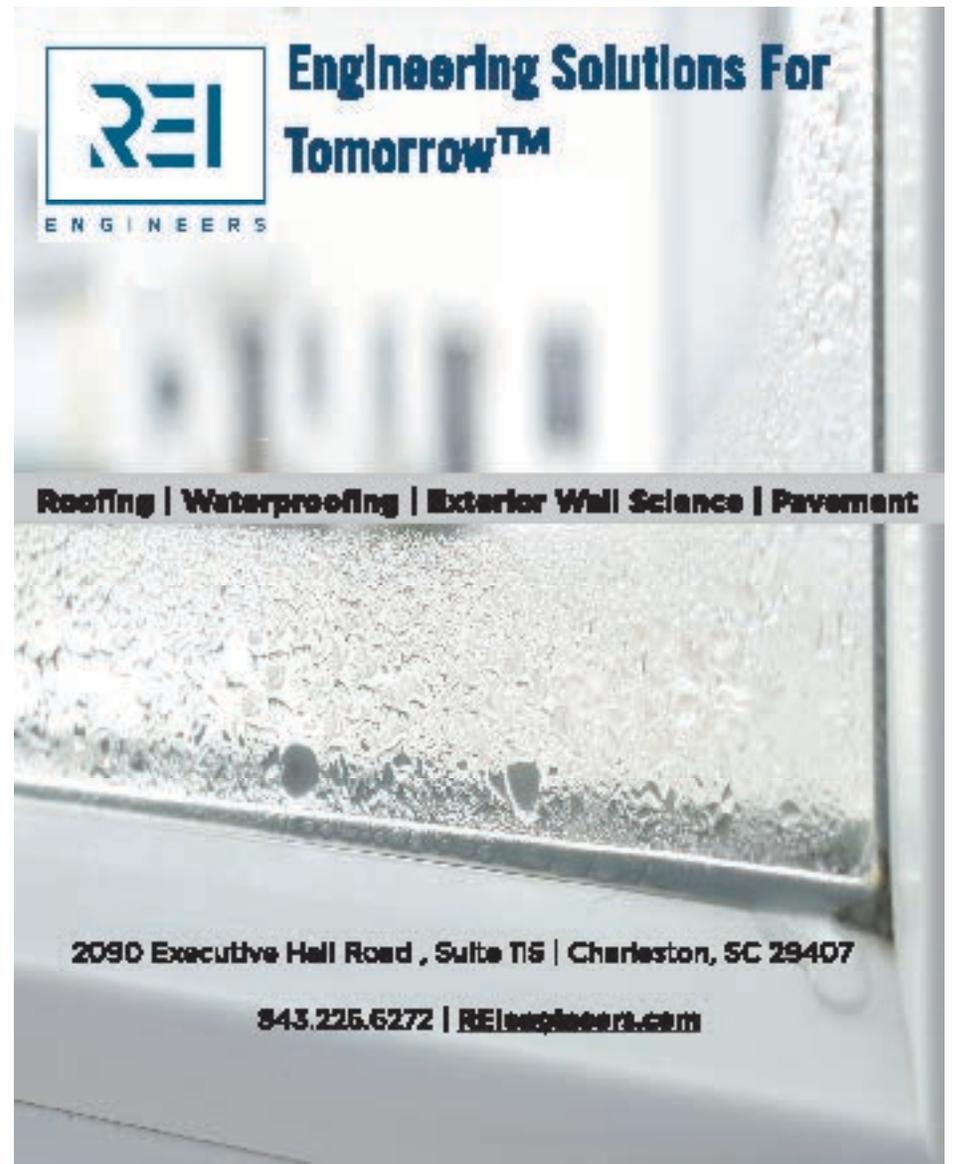
"That said, we're really proud of the work we're already doing here," McKenzie said.

As for Blue Zones, Buettner said at the town hall in September that he doesn't want to work with a city that doesn't want him.

"I'd like to work here, but if I can't work here, I've got 40 other cities that might work," he said.

At the beginning of October, he was in Sardinia, Italy, one of the original blue zones, doing research for National Geographic. 

Reach staff writer Patrick Hoff at 843-849-3144 or @PatHoffCRBJ on Twitter.



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