



ONGOING MISSION: J.D. Brickhouse, long-term Partnership for the Sounds chairman, stepped down position in January. Tyrell County Manager David Clegg will take over the role. Pictured (left to right) Brickhouse, Vice Chairman Bill Rich, Clegg, Partnership for the Sounds Executive Director Jackie Wood, past Vice Chairman John Ed Whitehurst. (Partnership for the Sounds)

Change of guard for Partnership for the Sounds

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After nearly 24 years as chairman of the Partnership for the Sounds Board of Directors, J.D. Brickhouse resigned from that post effective at the board's January 2017 meeting. Brickhouse had served as chairman since the organization was formed in 1993.

“It is an honor to have been entrusted with leading the Partnership for all these years,” Brickhouse said. “I’m so proud of all we’ve accomplished and truly believe we’ve been a positive force for the entire Albemarle-Pamlico region. But also I believe there are great things still ahead for us, and it’s time for a new generation to take us to that future.”

Brickhouse will be replaced as board chairman by Tyrrell County manager and attorney David Clegg, who was elected at the board's March 16 meeting. Hyde County Manager Bill Rich was elected vice-chairman, succeeding John Ed Whitehurst of Bertie County. Whitehurst was elected to the position of secretary-treasurer.

"There aren't many nonprofits who have one person serve as board chairman for over 23 years," said PfS Executive Director Jackie Woolard. "But our other board members always valued J.D.'s vision and commitment so highly that changing just for the sake of change never made sense. You can honestly say the Partnership would not exist without him. Thankfully, he will be staying on as a board member."

Brickhouse was serving as Tyrrell County administrator in the late 1980s when large swaths of his county were included in the newly formed Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. Though the protected land would limit development of what was already the least-populated county in North Carolina, Brickhouse saw an opportunity.

He began working with leaders in Beaufort, Hyde and Bertie counties who, like those in Tyrrell County, were independently seeking to build a center highlighting the environmental resources of their community. Brickhouse was pivotal in convincing the group that joining forces was a more likely route to success than competing for limited dollars in small-town eastern North Carolina. But how to do that posed a challenge.

"There are barriers that often make it difficult for local governments to work together," said Brickhouse. "But this group had the foresight to see that eastern North Carolina's remoteness made pooling resources the best option, so we were determined to make it happen."

Their solution was the Partnership for the Sounds, a nonprofit organization with a mission to build and operate environmental education centers in each community that would promote tourism and sustainable economic development on the Albemarle-Pamlico peninsula. The

unusual combination of government, environmental, economic and educational interests garnered so much public and private commitment locally that the state pledged additional support, and in 1993 the organization was chartered.

Through the mid-to-late 1990s, the Partnership directed the design and construction of the North Carolina Estuarium in Washington; the Roanoke/Cashie River Center in Windsor; and the Tyrrell County Visitor's Center and Columbia Theater Cultural Resources Center in Columbia. It continues to operate those facilities to this day.

PfS also oversaw major improvements to Mattamuskeet Lodge in Hyde County before the building had to be closed in 2000 because of longstanding structural problems, and it was active in operating the historic Octagon House near Engelhard for several years. The Partnership worked with the Pocosin Lakes NWR to develop its Walter B. Jones Sr. Center for the Sounds in Columbia, as well.

Though the Partnership's state appropriation was sharply reduced beginning in 2013, some funding specifically designated for the Estuarium has continued through various state programs. Along with that money, the Partnership continues to support its operations through admissions, gift shop sales, grants, donations and local government appropriations.

"I have been aware of the innovation and success of the Partnership for many years through my former positions with the NC Department of Commerce," Clegg said. "Now that I have had the opportunity to see its vital impact across the region up close through my position in Tyrrell County, I know what a resource its great staff, dedicated leadership and a strong commitment to its purpose are for our long term economic development. I'm very excited to be a part of the emerging role of the Partnership in the Albemarle-Pamlico region."