



Title: SC170 contractor gets lowest rating in state
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SCDOT PERFORMANCE SCORES

SC 170 contractor gets lowest rating in state

Score based on getting projects done safely, on time and on budget

Score released for the 1st time earlier this year

Cleland Site Prep Inc. owner says score is inaccurate, appeal has been filed

BY LUCAS HIGH
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One of Beaufort County's largest contractors may be the worst construction firm in the state.

At least that's the results of the S.C. Department of Transportation's latest ranking of contractors who have done construction and road improvements for South Carolina.

Cleland Site Prep Inc., an Okatie-based company at the center of a recent dispute with Beaufort County over project delays and design mistakes on the S.C. 170 road-widening project in Greater Bluffton, received a lower performance evaluation score than every other construction firm evaluated. That's nearly 350 firms.

Company owner Avery Cleland said last week that the score does not accurately re-

flects the quality of his firm's work and that he has appealed the ranking.

"We disagree with their ratings and the way they determine their ratings," he said of SCDOT.

WHAT IS A CONTRACTOR PERFORMANCE EVALUATION SCORE?

Cleland's 2016 score is 64.85 out of a total of 100 possible points. No other company scored lower than 67.

The highest score was 88.03, given to Charlotte-based Crowder Construction Co.

Cleland's score puts the firm below SCDOT's minimum performance threshold, set at 66.6 for 2016, which could limit its ability to do future work for the state.

"A consequence of a having a (performance score) below the (minimum threshold) is that the contractor will be prohibited from bidding" on certain large state road projects, according to an SCDOT document.

First issued in 2006, SCDOT's contractor performance evaluation, or CPE, uses a series of measurements, such as number of workers' compensation claims filed, final cost of a project as compared to original bid price and work completion dates, to determine whether contractors get projects done safely, on time and on budget.

SEE RATING, 7A

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RATING

These scores, which SCDOT kept closely guarded for a decade, were first made public in March by The Nerve, a

Columbia-based government watchdog website.

IS THE SCORE FAIR?

Cleland contends that the low rating is based

solely on the controversial S.C. 170 widening project that wrapped up last fall and that the score fails to take into account that Beaufort County and

others contributed to the project's delays and cost overruns.

The \$15 million project that widened the highway to four lanes between S.C.

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46 and U.S. 278 was finished more than a year late and \$1.7 million over its initial price tag.

The problems plaguing the job were numerous but began when Cleland leaders questioned whether the project's county-hired engineering firm miscalculated designs and failed to meet state asphalt standards.

A slew of project change orders and widespread finger-pointing ensued.

Last summer, Beaufort County fired Cleland Site Prep from the project.

In November, the two parties reached a settlement in which the county rescinded the company's termination, restoring Cleland's standing with its bonding company.

Cleland Site Prep agreed not to pursue any action against the county for erroneous project designs and delays but let the county keep \$452,000 of the \$1.52 million withheld from the company after its initial termination.

"There was blame all the way around," county administrator Gary Kubic said of the S.C. 170 project last week.

Avery Cleland called the project "a mess for every-

body."

He argues the company's low CPE score does not "recognize final settlement with the county."

SCDOT had "limited information about that job, and their determination was inaccurate," Cleland said. "And we stand by the quality of our business and our employees."

He said he has appealed the company's score to SCDOT, "but they have yet to give us an adequate response."

The Island Packet and The Beaufort Gazette recently filed a public records request with SCDOT for Cleland's previous CPE scores and information related to a potential appeal by the company. The state has yet to provide that information.

"These government agencies move so slow," Cleland said.

DOES THE SCORE MATTER?

While Cleland takes issue with the firm's CPE score, he said it's not slowing the company down.

"We don't care to do too much more (SCDOT) work anyway. We have enough other work to do

without taking on their projects," he said. "We're not sitting around waiting (for SCDOT to process the CPE score appeal). We have projects going all over the place — Savannah, Ridgeland, Hilton Head, Bluffton."

The company is currently involved with several projects at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, Avery Cleland said.

He said the company "has an outstanding record" on those projects, and "federal and military contracts have much higher standards for bidders than state projects."

The firm was involved with one Beaufort County School District project in the past five years — site preparation work for athletic fields at Bluffton Middle School, district spokesman Jim Foster said.

That 2013 project was completed on budget but several months behind schedule, he said.

It's unclear whether that brief delay would affect the company should it bid on future projects. But the district's procurement code does include past performance as an important consideration for contractor selection.

Cleland Site Prep, which

does work for private developers as well as public entities, has not worked with the county since the S.C. 170 project settlement.

But county officials don't rule out using the company again in the future.

"I don't have any problem with them," Beaufort County Council chairman Paul Somerville said. "Everyone makes mistakes."

Kubic said the company "has the same opportunity as any other contractor to bid" on future projects.

"Past projects are relevant, but that doesn't mean they won't be considered for future projects," he said.

"Cleland is the largest local contractor for roadway projects," Kubic said, so there may be future projects that the company is uniquely suited to be able to complete.

Also, "one of the things going for Cleland is they are a local company that employs quite a few Beaufort County residents," he said. Local preference is considered when evaluating bids.

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Cleland

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THEOPHIL SYSLO Staff photo

The state has given Okatie-based Cleland Site Prep Inc. a lowest-in-the-state performance score based on cost overruns and delays on the S.C. 170 widening project. Company owner Avery Cleland disagrees with the ranking and has appealed it. In this April 2014 photo, drivers pick their way through the S.C. 170 construction work near Bluffton Parkway.