

The Blackshear Times

Online Edition
Liked by Many • Cussed by Some • Read by Them All
Pierce County and Blackshear, Ga. 31516

OPINION

WILLIAMS / Oceans left \$\$ here for some, not others

A new attempt at mining minerals from our sandy soil may get the job right

[Print Page](#)

By Robert M. Williams, Jr.

Published:

Tuesday, October 16, 2012 11:05 PM EDT

We all know oceanfront property is valuable.

Especially, you can understand, if it is located in Charlton or Brantley Counties.

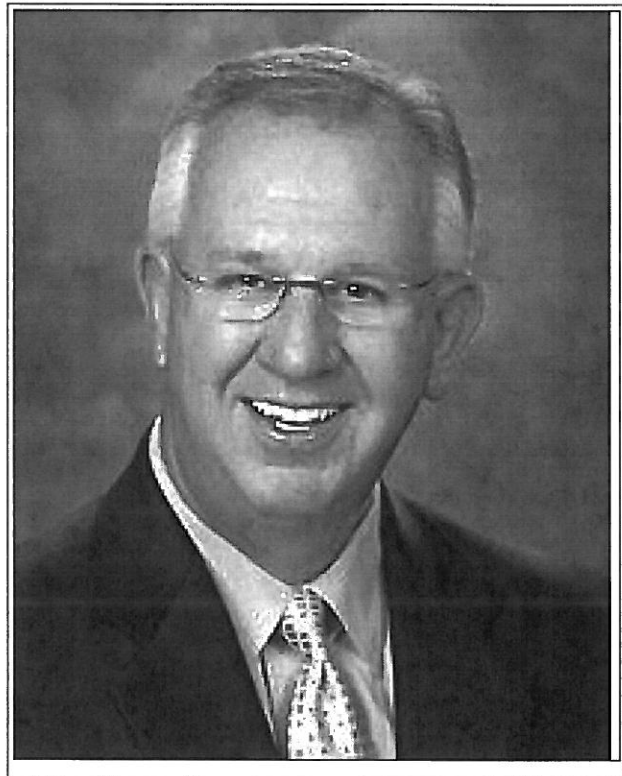
Before you get out your swimsuit, though, remember it's probably been a couple of million years since porpoises and sea turtles roamed the sandy, palmetto-strewn pine barrens of our Okefenokee region. The ocean that once covered Southeast Georgia left indelible marks, however. Just ask any well-digger who's churned up artifacts while drilling for water. Wells run 300 feet deep or more and it's common for fossilized sea shells, shark's teeth and more to come up from those depths.

Those deposits and other rich sediments, some washed down to our region from as far away as the Appalachians, are now creating newfound wealth for a few property owners here in our little stretch of swampland. The wiregrass area's latest cash crop comes from the soil, but it can't be planted. Those rhythmic ocean waves eons ago gradually allowed traces of a variety of minerals to settle deep along the sandy ridges. Among them are Zircon and Titanium. Mining for those minerals will, according to Brantley County Commission Chairman Ronald Ham, soon pump \$25-\$30 million directly into the area economy.

In a region where attracting new industry has been rare as mountain goat sightings, Ham is ecstatic over the 40-45 "direct jobs" to be created and he's near giddy describing the "multiplier effect" when "all those truckers and mechanics stop to eat lunch every day." Ham, as well as Charlton County Chairman John Meyer, are pleased that a company known as an innovator and leader in environmentally-conscious stewardship of the land will be extracting those riches from the powdery sand overlapping the Brantley-Charlton County line. Southern Ionics, based in West Point, Mississippi, with operations in Augusta, Georgia as well as Louisiana, Tennessee, Texas and Alabama plans to pour millions into this operation.

Ron Rose, Director of Mining, is the company's point man here in contracting with landowners, soothing worried public officials and conservationists, and answering a reporter's questions.

Rose says many factors led his firm to invest in new jobs where few have come before.



"This area has been scouted for mining for decades," tells Rose as he directs his truck over a rutted two-path lane deep into the pines. "Test holes were first dug around here in the 1960's."

Other firms have tried extracting the minerals since then, but none stayed long. Southern Ionics says this time will be different.

"Prices for the minerals have tripled and quadrupled," explains Rose. "It was \$400-\$500 a ton then, but Zircon today brings \$2,500 per ton."

Demand is coming from the same places driving up other costs: China and Asia. Higher prices now make the mineral lode available in our area worth an estimated \$30 million-plus each year for at least a decade. And that's just from a patch of 120 acres annually.

Environmental and financial problems with past mining companies have made some in this area skittish over the prospects of another operation starting up.

Among the skeptics is retired banker, Billy Michael Lee, of Hoboken who says he is "waiting to see" if Southern Ionics will "do things the way they should."

Lee says he is cautiously optimistic, though, and concedes Southern Ionics seems to be "making an effort" to address local concerns.

Environmental troubles drove away one of America's giants, the DuPont Corporation, a few years back when they proposed mining too near the Okefenokee Swamp. Rose says his firm won't repeat mistakes of the past. Southern Ionics' closest point to the Okefenokee is 13 miles away.

"And we won't be drawing any water from the rivers or streams and we will not be doing any mining from wetlands."

No chemicals are involved, either. Rose says they will strip away one-two feet of topsoil from a series of 10-acre pits and "97% of what comes out of those holes will go back in before the topsoil is put back over them and trees are planted."

A \$4 million bond posted with the state will help guarantee that reclamation.

Satilla Riverkeeper Clay Montague has been impressed.

"They've done a good job in communicating," says Montague, "and they've gone to a great deal of trouble and design to avoid repeating previous problems other mining companies have had here."

Lee may have expressed local sentiment best.

"Heck. We gotta trust somebody and give 'em a chance or we won't ever have any jobs here."

And jobs, just like oceanfront property, are valuable.

(Sad Note: Rose says no deposits have been found in Pierce County.)

• Robert M. Williams, Jr. is Editor & Publisher of The Blackshear Times. Email: rwilliams@theblack-sheartimes.com.

Read more top stories available in the October 17, 2012 edition of *The Blackshear Times* (Subscribers [click here](#) to log in and read the entire paper online.)

Copyright © 2012 - The Blackshear Times

[x] Close Window