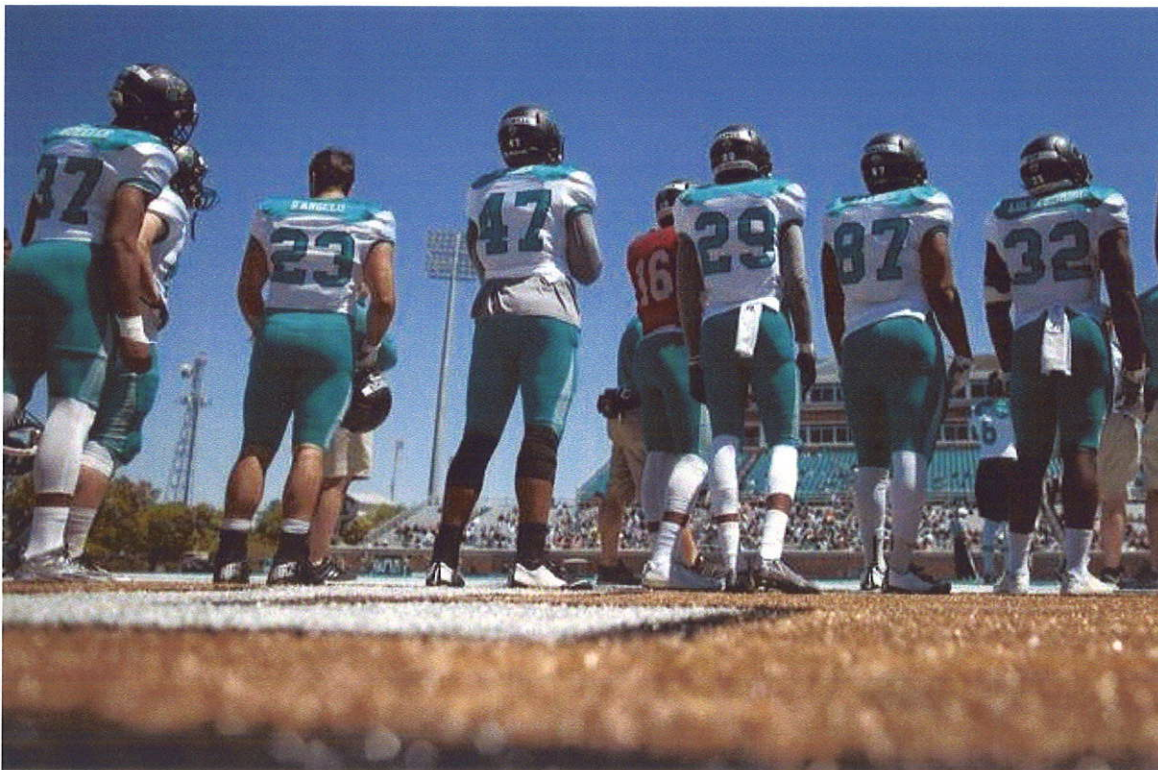**THE BUZZ**   AUGUST 23, 2016 2:05 PM

Coastal Carolina's football stadium plan OK'd amid outcry from Gov. Haley

TheBuzz

The Buzz

A blog from The State's political team of Cassie Cope, Bristow Marchant, Jamie Self and Avery Wilks.

BY JAMIE SELF

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COLUMBIA — A state budget board approved Coastal Carolina University's $32 million plan to expand its football stadium, ignoring a higher education panel's rejection of the project as too expensive.

The S.C. Fiscal Accountability Authority approved the project in a 3-2 vote Tuesday with support from the state's chief budget writers in the House and Senate and the state's top accountant.

Gov. Nikki Haley and S.C. Treasurer Curtis Loftis opposed the project, saying the S.C. Commission on Higher Education had rejected proposals for Brooks Stadium four times.

"If you override CHE (the Commission on Higher Education) today, then why have it?" Haley asked, adding that the move would set a dangerous precedent for other universities and colleges looking to move forward on building projects without the commission's support.

The stadium expansion is necessary for Coastal Carolina's football program to move up from the NCAA Football Championship Subdivision (previously Division I-AA) to the Football Bowl Subdivision (previously I-A).

Approving the stadium project – which will increase seating capacity to 20,700 in support of the university's move from the Big South Conference to the larger Sun Belt Conference – would send a message to colleges and universities that they can lobby lawmakers directly for support of projects and ignore the commission's decisions, giving "every university the ability to say the CHE doesn't matter," she said.

"How will you ever be able to say that you're conservative, accountable in any way setting standards for higher education?"

Earlier this year, state lawmakers approved Coastal's stadium project in the state budget and also exempted the Conway university from getting required approval from the S.C. Commission on Higher Education.

Haley vetoed the bill, but lawmakers overrode it.

"From the beginning we've been confident in our plan and the track record of this university," CCU athletic director Matt Hogue said. "Did we have to maybe change our game plan? Sure. But we were confident in our plan all along and we're pleased we were able to get to the finish line."

Approval of the $32 million plan doesn't grant the university state funding, but as a public university it must receive state consent. The project will be funded largely with bonds. Hogue said the bond amount will be nearly $23 million and will be

paid back by the university over 25 years. The total financing plan takes into account other sources including Chanticleer Athletic Foundation contributions, athletic department revenue and donations.

Haley said the commission had recently shifted its focus to provide more of a watchdog role over college and university spending. That role would be undercut if lawmakers approved the project despite the commission having rejected it.

But Senate Finance Chairman Hugh Leatherman, R-Florence, and House Ways and Means Chairman Brian White, R-Anderson, disagreed Tuesday, joining S.C. Comptroller General Richard Eckstrom in pushing the project to approval.

White applauded the commission's efforts to watchdog higher education projects, but said that the project was vetted by and won approval from the Joint Bond Review Committee – another state spending board that must approve construction projects.

Eckstrom said the stadium has been a longtime goal for the school, which has made great strides in establishing itself as a sustainable, thriving university.

Brooks Stadium currently accommodates 9,214 fans and was designed to grow with the football program.

It opened for CCU's inaugural home game in 2003 with 6,408 seats. Nearly 1,000 seats were added prior to the 2006 season, and another 1,600 were added behind the north end zone in 2010.

The need to expand Brooks Stadium is tied to the Chants' move to the Sun Belt and FBS. The football program will debut in the Sun Belt in 2017 and become a fully-eligible FBS member in 2018, and the NCAA requires FBS teams to maintain an average paid attendance of 15,000 per home game at least once every two years.

CCU has additional institutional requirements to reach the FBS level, and according to NCAA Bylaw 20.9.9.5.1, failure to comply with any FBS requirements twice in a 10-year period would result in restricted membership and a ban of at least one year from postseason football.

"We wouldn't be allowed in FBS ultimately [without the expansion]," CCU head football coach Joe Moglia said. "In two or three years if we never got that stadium built, that would be an issue."

Coastal Carolina and the Chanticleer Athletic Foundation have been raising private funds for the project for the past few months, with several six-figure gifts, according to CCU president Dave DeCenzo.

The Chants already had a pledge from the CAF for a $2 million contribution upon completion of the construction with annual contributions of $500,000 from the CAF and $200,000 from athletic department revenue over the life of the bonds that will provide the upfront funding.

"We can get back to our planning and ultimately bidding the contracts," Hogue said. "That's the next step. This was the last filter. I think everybody is excited and energized to get back to our plans for expansion."

The expansion will not likely be completed until sometime after the 2017 football season. Hogue said temporary seating structures could be erected if needed in the meantime.

"The timeline is undetermined until we can get a contractor hired," Hogue said. "Obviously we want to get everything done as fast as we can."

The Sun News reporter Alan Blondin contributed to this article.

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