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Commentary: SC special purpose districts provide valuable services

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The Post and Courier recently published [a column](#) and [an editorial](#) about South Carolina's special purpose districts that are, at best, shortsighted and misinformed. So, we'd like to inform the newspaper and you, its readers, about the important role these districts serve in our state.

Special purpose districts were created by the General Assembly because a growing number of rural communities were not being served by larger, existing governments — either because those governments didn't want to or couldn't afford to do so.

We all know communities can't grow and thrive without the critical services special purpose districts provide — fire, water, sewer and trash, to name the most common. Without these districts, South Carolina likely wouldn't have been able to grow outside of large municipalities like Charleston, Greenville and Columbia because the dollars wouldn't have added up. Now that we've laid the groundwork and served the people of these communities for generations, the same governments that didn't want to serve them and necessitated our very existence want to add them to their tax base.

There's the fundamental difference between a special purpose district and some of our state's large municipal governments: We have always seen our customers as a part of a small but mighty community, not as a tax base. We know them, and they know us. Most importantly, they know where their tax dollars are going. Our customers know their hard-earned money is going right back into making sure they have a top-notch fire department, the most reliable trash removal service possible or the best water and sewer service in their area.

One of the principal virtues of special purpose districts is their concentrated mission, and the districts in our state execute their mission well. That focus allows for governance and operations that are tailored to the community's needs, rather than being lost in the complexity of general-purpose government. When a citizen complains about water rates or trash service, there is a direct line of accountability to a board whose sole mandate is to ensure that service is provided in the most efficient way possible. Cities and counties must balance dozens of priorities — police, roads, planning, recreation and more — which often means that less visible, but not less essential, services get neglected. In fact, if we didn't provide excellent services and a level of reliability that our customers appreciate, they would have demanded change long ago.

Special purpose districts are vital to ensuring that our most vulnerable communities have the resources, focus, expertise and authority to meet their needs. They should be preserved and applauded for their important role in South Carolina's tremendous success, not abolished.

Tony Segars is president of the S.C. Association of Special Purpose Districts.