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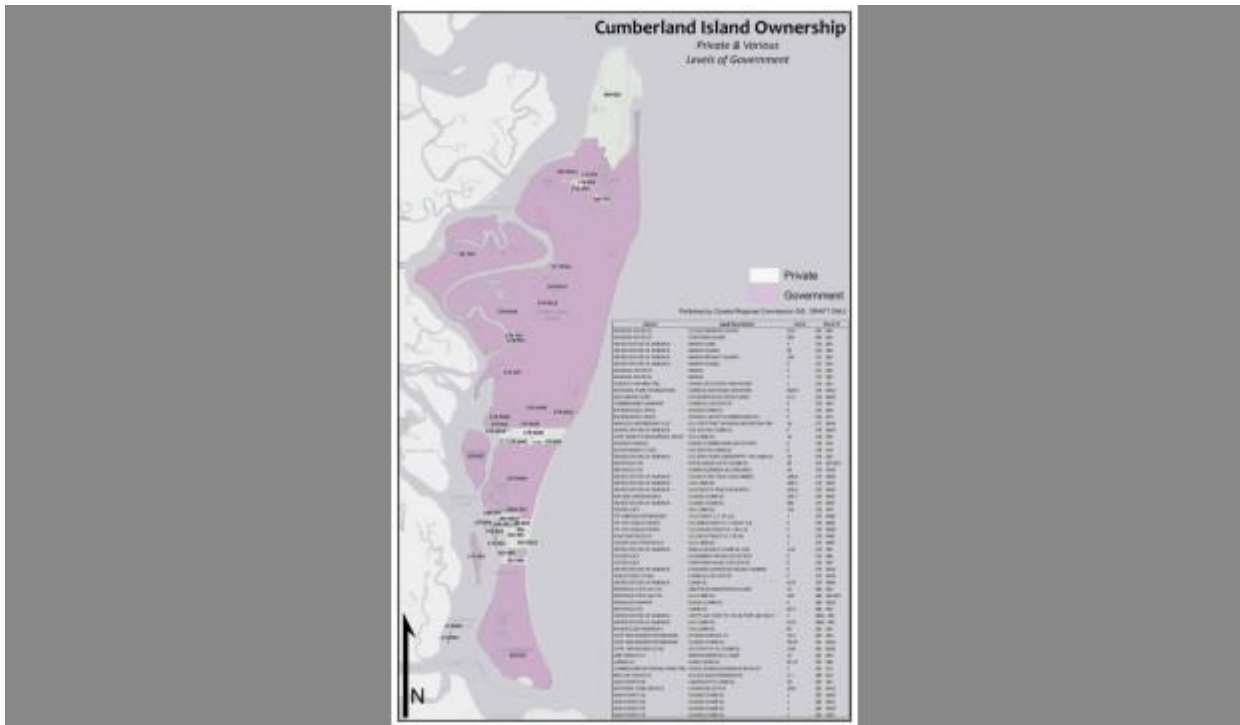
Rezoning proposed for 1,000 acres on Cumberland Island

Request sets off protests concerned about pristine wilderness on barrier island

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Sea Camp at Cumberland Island National Seashore. (Photo courtesy National Park Service)



Private property on Cumberland Island totals about 1,000 acres, including a belt of land about midway up the island near the National Seashore’s Sea Camp. Map courtesy Camden County.

What began as one family’s plan to build a residential compound on private land within Cumberland Island National Seashore has morphed into negotiations that could rezone 1,000 acres of privately held property there.

In December, Camden County officials approved a variance to allow Lumar LLC, made up of Coca-Cola heirs including the Rev. Sam Candler, dean of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta, to divide an 88-acre tract near the park’s Sea Camp into 10 lots. The request and decision set off a storm of protest from legions of campers and day visitors across the country who argue that development will ruin the wilderness experience on Georgia’s largest barrier island.

Two appeals were filed, but before the scheduled April 4 hearing both Lumar and the appellants requested time to negotiate a compromise solution.

The county then tabled the appeal and gathered the interested parties on March 22 to negotiate. A possible solution, county officials say, is to create a new zoning district so that future variances and appeals will not be necessary for each parcel on a case-by-case basis. There is about 1,000 acres of fee simple property on Cumberland Island, including land held by members of the Candler and Carnegie families as well as about 200 acres owned by the Nature Conservancy.

County attorney John Myers said the fight over private property on Cumberland is not one the county wanted. He met with the park's superintendent when the issue first arose. He said exactly what Myers didn't want to hear — that despite sitting in the park the fee simple properties are not under the park's jurisdiction.

"It's an ugly baby that got handed right back to us," Myers said. "It's probably been brewing for over 40 years and it's just coming to the logical conclusion from where they left it in 1974."

Camden County declined to provide documents presented at the negotiations, saying they did not retain copies.

But Alex Kearns attended the meeting as the director of the St. Marys Earthkeepers, which appealed the Lumar variance. Afterward, the Earthkeepers withdrew from the negotiations.

"My sense from the beginning is that the monster in the room is the 1,000 acres now in peril," Kearns said. "I don't know what kind of density the county would be looking at, I really don't, but whether it would be one house per acre or one per 25 or one per 100, none of that sat well with the Earthkeepers."

At the higher density ranges the rezoning could allow 800 new houses, which would bring chainsaws and bulldozers to the island prized for its idyllic beaches and maritime forest.

"I think it will plunge a knife in the heart of Cumberland Island as a wilderness experience for people," Kearns said. "That 1,000 acres is located in the belly of the island."

History and what's next

Candler descendants were among those who negotiated with the National Park Service to create Cumberland Island National Seashore in 1972. The Park Service bought most of the nearly 40,000-acre island and struck deals that allowed residents and, in many cases, their descendants to have "retained property rights" — to continue to use existing homes for a set period of time.

But other fee-simple ownership tracts were left in place. Among them is the Lumar property, which was purchased in 1998 for \$3.5 million.

Camden exempted Cumberland Island from zoning from 1992-2002. Then in 2002 the Lumar property was assigned "Conservation Preservation" zoning. The owner requested to subdivide the property for their heirs, but needed a variance because the county ordinarily requires a paved road in front of each lot. Cumberland has no paved roads so the planning commission approved a hardship variance on Dec. 7 to allow for a subdivision with dirt roads.

Bill Sapp, senior attorney for the Southern Environmental Law Center, is negotiating on behalf of the National Parks Conservation Association, one of the appellants.

“We continue to work diligently toward resolution of this issue that will protect the natural and cultural integrity of the island,” he said. “We also continue in our attempts to persuade the county not to move forward with a rezoning of the entire island.”

Lumar attorney Stephen Kinney did not respond to a request for comment.

County officials indicated in a public “fact sheet” that they’ll work on a rezoning solution for another two months.

“If no resolution is accomplished by June 1, 2017, the county will go forward with a hearing on the variance as originally granted,” the fact sheet states. “If the parties are able to agree on a draft ordinance by June 1, 2017, it is anticipated that Lumar will withdraw its petition for a variance which will obviate the need for an appeal hearing. The draft ordinance will then be reviewed for approval by public hearing in front of the Planning Commission and the Board of Commissioners.”

The negotiations are meant to help the county avoid costly litigation, Myers said. If they fail it doesn’t mean the county will give up on rezoning. That will likely go forward.

“If we rezone the property it sets some distinct and bright line guidelines for property owners to follow on Cumberland Island,” he said. “They want that.”

In the meantime the county continues to hear from Cumberland Island supporters around the country. Calls spiked into the hundreds last weekend after the Alt National Park Service Facebook page posted about the issue and included the county clerk’s phone number.