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Citizens speak against variance, rezoning

A private owner's quest to subdivide property on Cumberland Island won't be considered by the Camden County commissioners until June, but several people attended Tuesday's county meeting to speak out against the request. The county's planning commission approved the variance request after representatives of property owner Lumar LLC argued that the county ordinance imposed an undue hardship. Two parties have appealed the decision, which means it then goes to the county commissioners for a vote. The variance would only allow Lumar to subdivide their property into smaller tracts, but opponents of the variance fear that it would lead the way to eventual rezoning. Those concerns appear to be well founded, according to a fact sheet distributed by the county at its meeting Tuesday. "The parties met March 22 with the county and National Park Service at which time options were discussed regarding potential rezoning ordinance amendment to specifically address the unique nature of fee simple properties (approximately 1,000 acres) remaining within the boundaries of Cumberland Island National Seashore," stated the fact sheet. The fact sheet also said if all parties can agree on a draft ordinance, then it would make the variance request unnecessary. "If no resolution is accomplished by June 1, 2017, the county will go forward with a variance as originally granted," the fact sheet stated. As recently as last week, county planning director Eric Landon said no action has been taken to rezone the island. County law also requires commissioners to advertise any proposed zoning changes and solicit comments at a public hearing before they can vote to approve it. St. Marys resident Tom Canning said you can still support private property rights and be against this variance. "... I support personal property rights. However, I hold them responsible to stay current and plan within their property zoning and legal status," Canning said. "For more than a decade, Lumar LLC has paid less than \$2,000 a year in annual property tax for more than 87 acres of prime ocean front real estate within the boundary of the national seashore. "The tax advantage exists with the

assumption that there is no opportunity for residential development. This tax rate is not intended to provide a financial advantage to the landowner so he can save money and build at a later date,” Canning said. Canning was one of nine people who approached the podium to speak during the public comments portion of the meeting. Seven were Camden County residents, one was from Wayne County and one was from Jacksonville, Fla. Janet Heath of Woodbine said the island belongs not only to the people of Camden, but all Americans. She asked the commissioners to protect the integrity of the national seashore and serve the people who elected them, rather than special interests. Steve Weinkle of Harrietts Bluff said citizens accept restrictions of all kinds on their property for the sake of the public good. “I’ve been told the county has no choice because we are violating private property rights. That’s just not true and you know that’s not true. The county has a zoning ordinance that places restrictions on private property owners throughout the county. We can’t do everything we want on our property.” He added that the courts have long upheld the government’s right to impose zoning restrictions on private property and said he opposed any changes to the county’s current zoning law. Terrence McGee of Jacksonville said he has frequented the barrier islands for several years of his life and says changes like these are a slippery slope. “I don’t think it is so much about the people who are here today but it’s about the future generations,” he said. “I know how a crack in the door works. People are very well intentioned ... but down the road you need a piece of property for something else.” Melissa Sellers of Camden County urged the commissioners not to make what she believes will be a “huge environmental blunder.” “Our family moved here because of the unspoiled beauty of Cumberland Island and I’m sure we are not alone,” Sellers said. Although the commissioners did not respond to any of the public comments, Chairman Jimmy Starline spoke informally with Canning at the dais just before the meeting. Starline took issue with Canning’s assessment that the county was to blame for allowing the threat of further development, saying that the park service was ultimately to blame for not purchasing that swath of private property when it had the opportunity.