

Letters to the T&G Editor – 03/30/2017

Cumberland can not be imperiled Dear Editor, I refrained from writing about “the Cumberland Island issue” in these pages while I still felt that there was some hope of finding a reasonable compromise between the island residents — Lumar LLC — who sought, and gained, a county hardship variance in order to subdivide their 87-plus acre property to build their “family compound,” the environmental groups and citizens who appealed the variance and the county. Throughout this process, the St. Marys EarthKeepers have been honored to partner with the Southern Environmental Law Center and the National Parks Conservation Association. We have worked tirelessly for five months, exploring every conceivable option available to us in terms of respecting the island families’ history of stewardship while protecting the integrity of the island itself. We have met, repeatedly, with the island families’ representatives, their lawyers, county administrators and National Park Service personnel. From that initial hardship variance, it has mutated into a completely different issue. Now, the entirety of Cumberland Island itself is at stake as the Camden County commissioners forge ahead with their plan to rezone all 1,000 acres of privately owned inholdings, thus potentially exposing the island to a devastating level of development. On March 22, we had a five-hour meeting with all parties involved and it became abundantly clear to me that there is no acceptable compromise on the horizon — and for that I am truly sorry. So we are, it seems, at an impasse. For this reason, I will not be engaging in the rezoning process of the 1,000 acres for it violates the enabling legislation of the Cumberland Island seashore: “the seashore shall be permanently preserved in its primitive state, and no development of the project or plan for the convenience of visitors shall be undertaken which would be incompatible with the preservation of the unique flora and fauna or the physiographic conditions.” The decisions that are made today will have far-reaching consequences tomorrow. We cannot claim to want to foster the economic well-being of St. Marys while allowing the island to be compromised to the extent that it impacts the visitor experience and imperils our downtown businesses. Note that the draft City of St. Marys Master Plan vision statement includes — as the second item — “We cherish our environment, our heritage, and our role as gateway to Cumberland Island National Park.” We cannot promote spaceport and assure all and sundry that we are conscientious environmental stewards while simultaneously plunging a knife through the heart of a national seashore and United Nations Biosphere Reserve. Although I will not be at the negotiating table any longer, we will continue to fight the rezoning of the island. But we need your help. I urge all Camden County residents to make their voices heard by emailing the commissioners and speaking out at meetings. Share information via social media and watch for upcoming activities, action alerts and opportunities to participate. Alex Kearns, chair St. Marys EarthKeepers Inc.

Rezoning is an overreach by Candler, county Dear Editor, Groveling supplications to our five ephemeral county commissioners for crumbs of protection for the remaining undeveloped Cumberland Island inholding lands merely reinforce the commissioners’ preening notion that something other than accidental aberration and the unintended use of existing county regulations gave them the tools to insinuate themselves into plans for Cumberland’s longterm management; explode long-established National Park Service intent and planning; destroy the essence of Cumberland Island National Seashore

and wilderness. What began in December in the county planning commission as a zoning variance request by the influential Candler family has morphed into an ambitious rezoning and development plan by the county commissioners for the entire 1,000 acres of inholdings on Cumberland. What will result is an exclusive retreat for the Candlers and the other inholders — the situation existing before the creation of the national seashore and wilderness — only now the pesky peripheral upkeep of their entitled paradise will be footed by us taxpayers, in perpetuity. We raffraff will be cautioned to skirt their offensive, proliferating “NO TRESPASS” signs, defer to the increasing number of their insensitive and obtrusive vehicles on Cumberland’s dirt roads and beaches, seek out vistas not defiled by their new structures and solitude not interrupted by their noise. Nonsense! This is outrageous overreach by the commissioners and by the Candlers. There would be a cumulative and irreversible degradation of Cumberland caused by new development. We’re down to our last scraps of natural ecosystems and tranquility. Cumberland Island wilderness is the largest wilderness on the entire eastern seaboard. We’ve no room left for error yet our county attorney, negotiating the county commissioner’s betrayal of the national will, offers trite jingles to justify the unjustifiable: “Roofs are revenue.” “Ignorance is bliss” or “Extinction is forever” are better bromides for the situation. Consider the unintended consequences of allowing renewed development on Cumberland. What if people can’t stomach a significantly degraded Cumberland and choose to go elsewhere? Something priceless and irreplaceable would be destroyed for little or nothing by five temporary county commissioners of a single county in southeast Georgia who’ll live nationwide and forever as objects of scorn and footnotes in infamy to all who cherish Cumberland. Write or email the commissioners. Attend the next commissioners’ meeting at 6 p.m. Tuesday, April 4, at the commissioners’ chambers in Woodbine. Parents, grandparents, young adults, children old enough to understand, expectant mothers, come to the meeting and tell our commissioners “No new development on Cumberland.” Be able to tell your children and grandchildren that when it mattered, you stood up. America’s public lands are a uniquely American idea. No other country has honored its people by reserving and preserving its finest natural wonders for ordinary citizens. We are incredibly lucky to have one of them at our doorstep. Cumberland and its wildness are central to who we are as a people and what we represent as a nation. Fight for it. Jacqueline Eichhorn Harrietts Bluff

Commissioners should deny the hardship variance Dear Editor, Next Tuesday’s board of commissioners meeting is the place to tell them what laws you want changed. Each citizen gets two minutes near the start of the meeting to tell the commissioners anything you want. You don’t even have to prepare a speech — just stand up and say “I want you to ...” That’s it. Don’t like that you were ticketed when your dog barked too much? Tell commissioner Jimmy Starline to “Change the law.” Hate paying \$125 a year to run a tiny home-based business? Tell Commissioner Chuck Clark to “Change the law.” Want to burn your garbage rather than pay for pickup? Tell Commissioner Gary Blount to “Change the law.” Have to buy city water but you’d rather drink your own well water? Tell commissioner Lannie Brant to “Change the law.” They won’t let you build a second house on your property? Tell commissioner Ben Casey to “Change the law.” Of course, unless you are a big wheel and deserve special favors, expect your commissioners to ignore your request. But the influential Lumar LLC property owners on Cumberland Island are about to get the improper zoning they want. Some have said Lumar should be allowed to do

whatever they want because they own private property. But as we all know, we live with a lot of inconvenient laws that are expected to apply equally to everyone. Special zoning favors are called “variances” and Georgia’s law strictly controls the conditions that must apply to grant development variances. The Lumar zoning variance fails all five of the plainly worded requirements of the law so the Camden planning department’s erroneous approval of the request won’t stand in court. The law says our commissioners should deny Lumar’s request but they have instead twice delayed the vote while they find some way to give Lumar what they want. The Lumar owners need Camden’s commissioners to “change the law” so they can get their subdivision on Cumberland. That the commissioners will even consider changing the law for Lumar is plainly unfair to the rest of us who are not powerful or connected. Why should Lumar be granted a variance that “regular” citizens cannot expect to receive? The Lumar variance is not an alarmist concern but is a very real violation of the purpose of the Cumberland Island National Seashore. A subdivision adjacent to Sea Camp is a game-changer. The change can add up to 100 new homes next to parkland and wilderness! Lumar’s request can end up harming all of us by hurting St. Marys’ tourism, by setting a bad precedent others will be entitled to, by granting special favors to privileged people and in telling the National Park Service that Camden doesn’t value Cumberland. You may not be a descendant of a famous family or be fabulously rich, but you should expect equal treatment under the law. Speak up at Tuesday’s commission hearing at the Woodbine government building at 6 p.m. and tell your commissioners to “change the law” that’s a problem for you. Everyone should be treated the same. Steve Weinkle Harrietts Bluff
