

T&G OPINION Thursday, April 6, 2017

Zoning decisions affect everyone

If neighbors were capable of working things out amongst each other, we would not need the government to intervene. It is the job of our elected officials to create laws that respect the welfare and rights of the community at large, not just the individual. The variance request that a private Cumberland Island landowner is seeking from Camden County is not just a neighborhood issue, but one that has the potential to affect us all, Camden County citizens in particular. Those who pay property taxes here have a vested interest in how the community is zoned and how those decisions affect land values and tax revenues. With respect to Cumberland Island, zoning also could threaten the investment made years ago by our National Park Service. Because of the island's unique appeal, our local community enjoys the economic benefits of island visitors year-round. These are all issues of public import. Unfortunately, that conversation at present — as it relates to private property on Cumberland Island — has been limited to representatives from the county, the landowner and the appealing parties. The conversation also has evolved into something larger than just a variance, the issue that prompted the discussion. A county fact sheet notes that the county is now working behind closed doors with those parties to discuss a “potential zoning ordinance amendment” for private island properties. This is far more than just a variance request and the public deserves to know what is being negotiated on their behalf. They also should be given the opportunity to weigh in on the issue before it has been decided. The Tribune & Georgian filed a request for documents under the Georgia Open Records Act relating to those negotiations and the county denied it on the basis that it was “attorney work product” and subject to attorney-client privilege. We recently asked if the county was considering a zoning ordinance change for the island and were told no action had been taken. While this might be technically correct if no paperwork had been filed, it is now clear an amendment to the zoning law is already on the table. Even if the law is still in a draft form, state law requires it to be an open record. The county says it hopes to mediate a resolution before June, but if it does not, the variance appeal hearing will move forward as planned. If the county attorney does find a resolution between the two feuding parties, what role then does the voting public have in this issue? What point does it serve to advertise the law change and hold hearings to gather public comments if the commissioners have already brokered a backdoor deal with a few select stakeholders? With the lack of transparency in how this issue has been handled, it is easy to be concerned about the voice that average citizens will have in this historic decision. We encourage them to speak out anyway.