

THURSDAY, APRIL 20, 2017 TRIBUNE-GEORGIAN.COM

Is it time to take a stand?

St. Marys considers weighing in on Cumberland zoning

“Where else can you get on the boat, walk a path through natural trees and bushes, see a few animals but walk out on to a pristine, virgin beach, see the Atlantic Ocean in front of you, look to your left, look to your right, look behind you and you don’t see one scar that mankind is putting on this earth right now? It is the last place left,” St. Marys resident Dick Russell told St. Marys City Council. Nearly a dozen residents addressed council Monday, asking their representatives to take action to make St. Marys’ voice heard in discussions about rezoning Cumberland Island. “Sometimes you’re no longer able to tiptoe down the middle of the road anymore,” Russell added. “Sometimes you have got to take a stand. And this is a stand.” The issue first came up in December when the county planning commission approved a hardship variance to split about 88 acres owned by Lumar LLC into 10 lots. Two parties appealed the decision to the board of commissioners in January. The county has been meeting with representatives from Lumar and both parties to try to negotiate a compromise, including potentially changing the zoning. Commissioners have delayed hearing the appeal twice and now say they will hear the appeal if a resolution cannot be reached by June 1. As the gateway to Cumberland Island, where does that leave St. Marys? “Of the four governmental entities in Camden County, the City of St. Marys has a unique interest in Cumberland Island,” resident and former councilman Sam Colville said. “So far that I can determine, the county has not given any recognition to our unique interest in this. So I do advocate for an expression of concern.” Council considered signing a proclamation opposing development and rezoning on Cumberland Island but they were divided on the verbiage of a proposed proclamation, if it was too early to voice an opinion and what that opinion should be. They agreed, though, that whatever they say should not come from a split vote and voted to delay a decision until after a work session next week. “If we vote it down or send a mixed signal to the county, we’ve done nothing,” Councilman Jim Gant said. “I think we’re all concerned. We all love the island. We understand the importance of the island to St. Marys.” “We need to find a way to express our concerns in a way that all of us are comfortable with if we’re going to do this,” council member Elaine Powierski said, agreeing with Gant. Councilman Dave Reilly agreed with Gant and Powierski, adding that he felt a proclamation was premature and that the council needed more information. “I think we owe it to all of you and the citizens to get that before we do something rash and perhaps nobody listens to us after that,” Reilly said. What residents had to say Though their positions differed, residents urged council to take action. “The pivotal time for St. Marys to have their voice heard is now,” Alex Kearns said. “... Voicing concern would go a long way to let the citizens know that you are aware of this, you do care and you do share our concerns.” Colville added that he hoped residents spoke at county meetings too but he didn’t think that was enough to represent St. Marys. “I think there needs to be a formal expression of concern from the city,” he said. Bill Bruce, who filed one of the appeals on behalf of dozens of citizens, talked about private property rights. He said the current zoning doesn’t allow for residential and that zoning has been satisfactory for a long time. They’ve paid very little in property taxes as a result and should have to keep the land pristine, Bruce said. Tom Canning said he wasn’t in favor of development on the island or compromising and that a proclamation should represent St. Marys. The owners could have spoken up

when their land was zoned conservation preservation years ago, he said. Bill Sapp — a senior attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center, which also filed an appeal with other groups — spoke only for himself and talked about in-holdings in national parks. “Those in-holdings are treated differently than other rural land in Camden County or elsewhere and because of that they have densities that are much different than what you would see in other places,” Sapp said. “In many of the places we’ve researched, it’s one structure per 40 acres. In others, it’s one per 35 acres and in this case, maybe one for every 25 acres would still fall within the confines of this language, would respect the property owners’ rights out there but also protect what is so special about Cumberland Island. And that’s what we’re still trying to figure out.” Sapp said the sooner the city shared its opinion, the more effective their action would be. Ana Gunn asked council to articulate its concern in some way. “If you stand silent on this issue, you will be judged,” she said. “... I think you need to decide what side of history you want to be on.” Dave Schmitz told council how the dunes in Charleston, S.C., had disappeared as houses were built on them. “If you think for a second that if they open the door for Cumberland Island for this development, that’s not going to happen out there, you need to put your request into the state and get licensed to smoke stuff because you’re crazy,” he said.