

Opinion

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NEWS

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A VERSE FOR TODAY

Life is more than food, and the body is
more than clothing.
Luke 12:23

Is it time to protect Cumberland Island?

Georgia's Cumberland Island — with its sweeping beaches, enormous live oak trees and wild horses — is one of the most beautiful spots in the United States.

Its beauty leaves visitors speechless.

Pure beaches, the sand broken only by horses' hooves, stretch for miles. The moss-covered arms of live oaks drap the island's single dirt road and its 18-space campground at Sea Camp.

It is so remote that people can only reach the island by boat. The National Park Service limits visitors to 300 a day and prohibits vehicles. Those precautions, as well as the fact that more than 95 percent of the island is essentially publicly controlled, have kept the island pristine.

If any place could elicit bliss, it is this island.

No new privately owned buildings have been constructed on the island in many years, and people who love the island believed Cumberland was safe from development. Much of the land not owned outright by the national park is held under "retained rights" agreements that stipulate these parcels will revert to the park service in a certain amount of time.

But now in one fell swoop, the Camden County (Georgia) Planning Commission has given the go-ahead to compromise the pristine nature of Cumberland.

In December, the commission voted unanimously to allow a property owner permission to subdivide an 88-acre tract of land on Cumberland, presumably to build a compound of private family homes. The site is adjacent to the national seashore's oak-draped campground.

Camden County — what are you thinking?

There are places in this world that are so beautiful, so pristine, that it is unholy to compromise their wildness. Cumberland Island is just such a place.

Cumberland Island, the most southerly of Georgia's barrier islands, was once the private playground for the wealthy Carnegie family, which owned 90 percent of the land there. The family built several mansions on the island, and members often summered there amid the palmettos and wild horses, said to be the survivors of

Spanish shipwrecks offshore.

AN ISLAND LIKE NO OTHER

But after the Depression decimated family fortunes, the island was used less and less. And in the 1950s the family turned to the National Park Service to help preserve the largely undeveloped island.

A year after being approached by the Carnegies, the National Park Service named the island one of the most significant natural areas in the entire country. After a drawn-out process, the island was named a national seashore in 1972.

Although many of the private landowners decided their land to the National Parks Foundation, some 1,000 acres are still owned privately. One of those private parcels — owned by five members of the wealthy Candler family of Atlanta — is the land in question.

The Candlers, as Lumar LLC, which purchased the property in 1998, finally moved forward on their plans to build a family compound in August with an appeal to Camden County to waive a requirement that property can only be subdivided if it borders a paved road. In keeping with its pristine nature, there are no paved roads on Cumberland.

The five-member planning commission unanimously agreed to approve a "hardship variance," so the parcel could be subdivided into buildable sites, the first time since the 1970s that such subdivision was allowed on Cumberland.

Not only will the Candlers have to get various committees' approvals for stages of their plan, they are also sure to confront many who are against it.

In fact, individuals and organizations have already filed appeals to ask the Camden County Commission to reverse the planning commission's decision.

PANDORA'S BOX

But like Pandora, did the Camden County planning commission already open a box of development to assault the island?

Will the commission's seemingly one small action



While walking or riding a bicycle along one of the nature trails on Cumberland Island, visitors can glimpse views of wide open marsh. (The Florida Times-Union).

have enormous far-reaching consequences?

The fear is obviously that this waiver may open the door to others who will want to develop their land on the island for even more incompatible uses.

People have property rights, of course, and the door may be opened to this specific development. But like other special places in our region, like historic St. Augustine, great care must be taken to protect the beauty of Cumberland Island.

The appeals are set to be heard on Feb. 7.

But the time is now to make our voices heard for the preservation of Cumberland Island.

Do you want development?

Do you want to leave the property alone?

Do you want to make sure that this special place is protected for future generations?

Write. Send emails. Place telephone calls.

Cumberland is well worth preserving.
So what were Camden County officials thinking?

Camden Commission website: tinyurl.com/68vfkse