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By

[Mark Woods](#)

Mark Woods: If you want Cumberland Island preserved, now is time to let leaders know



The banner that will hang on the Riverview Hotel in St. Marys, Ga., across the street from the dock where tens of thousands of people a year board a ferry and head to Cumberland Island National Seashore.

Gaila Brandon ordered a banner to hang in front of the Riverview Hotel, the 100-year-old, two-story building located across the street from the dock in St. Marys, Ga., where tens of thousands of people a year board a ferry and head to Cumberland Island National Seashore.

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“I don’t think the majority of people, even here in Camden County, realize what is going on,” she said. “I think it’s about to hit the fan. I hope we see as many news trucks down here as when JFK Jr. got married on the island.”

That seems unlikely. We tend to devote more time and attention to the life and death of beautiful people than the life and death of beautiful places. But here is what is going on:

One controversial proposal — a “hardship variance” that would make it possible to subdivide and build homes on nearly 88 acres of undeveloped land in the heart of the island — has rapidly morphed into something even more troubling.

Most of this 36,000-acre island still belongs to you, the American public. And for 45 years, ever since the creation of the national seashore in 1972, a plan has gradually unfolded, piece by piece, to transfer even more land to the National Park Service and make the island even more wild.

But at this point, about 1,000 acres still remain privately owned, fee-simple inholdings.

County commissioners now are considering rezoning all of that land. Not just the 87.5 acres near Sea Camp where the heirs of Coca-Cola founder Asa Candler want to build.

In 1982, the Candlers made a \$9.2 million deal to sell their 38-acre compound on the north end of the island, with the stipulation that they could continue to live there until the youngest living heir at the time died. That still is decades away. But in 1998, the family

anonymously purchased a swath of land stretching across the midsection of the island. At the time, a lawyer for Lumar LLC insisted that the family behind the deal just wanted to own some pristine land.

Now they want to develop that land. They want the zoning changed to allow a 10-lot subdivision that could remain theirs forever. Or, for that matter, could be sold to others.

Sam Candler, the family patriarch, has said his family loves the island as much as anyone and has “every intention to keep it a holy and majestic place.”

I’d agree the Canders are among those who deserve credit for saving Cumberland Island, for preventing it from turning into Hilton Head decades ago. Their legacy could be as island saviors. Or it could be very different.

I don’t doubt that Sam Candler genuinely loves Cumberland and sincerely believes future generations of his family will have that same feeling. I do doubt the idea that development won’t change Cumberland and, at some point in the future, money won’t trump love.

It was ominous enough that people walking the Parallel Trail, just north of Sea Camp, recently spotted splotches of orange spray paint, presumably survey signs of potential things to come.

Now there’s the image of county commissioners taking all 1,000 acres, which under current zoning cannot be subdivided and developed, and making it fair game.

If this happens, Cumberland Island will be forever changed.

It wouldn’t instantly become just like so many other barrier islands, with bridges and golf carts and gated communities. The island still will have nearly 10,000 acres of designated wilderness. But it wouldn’t be the Cumberland Island that was envisioned with enabling legislation that said: “The seashore shall be permanently preserved in its primitive state.”

This is why park advocates are sounding alarms. As loudly as possible.

“We are on the brink of abandoning a 45-year commitment to the American people to provide future generations with a primitive island experience,” said Don Barger, southeast regional director of the National Parks Conservation Association.

“This is being pushed through with a level of haste I’ve not seen before,” St. Marys EarthKeepers Chair Alex Kearns said, sharing an op-ed that included dire warnings. “To those who have yet to find their way to this wonderland of natural beauty, hurry ... It is now on the endangered list and the clock is ticking.”

The next county commissioners meeting is Tuesday evening.

After I wrote about Cumberland earlier this year, I heard from many people who said how much they love the place and feel like it would be travesty to reverse the plan to make it even more pristine by allowing development.

If you believe that, now is the time to act. Once this land is rezoned, it could be too late.

Now is the time to contact officials in Camden County. Now is the time to convince those officials there are better ways to add more dollars to the area’s coffers (example: it’s time to push for an increase in the mandated 300-person daily visitor limit to the island). Now is the time to tell current members of the body that created the national seashore, Congress, to stand up for its future.

Now is the time to heed the banner made for the Riverview Hotel and respond to this plan with an all-caps “NO.”

The Riverview Hotel was built in 1916, the same year the National Park System was born. It has been owned by the Brandon family since the 1930s. When I talked to Gaila Brandon, she said that she married into the family and that the person I really should talk to was her husband.

Jerry Brandon, 73, is a Camden County native. He was mayor of St. Marys for 11 years. He remembers Cumberland Island before it became a national seashore and why it became one — to make its path into the future different from other barrier islands up and down the coast.

“Clearly the lack of development had a lot to do with it,” he said. “And clearly the intent of the act was to prevent development ... The problem was when they passed it, they didn’t have enough money to buy everybody out.”

That is even more of a problem today. President Trump’s budget proposal includes a 70 percent cut to the fund that for more than 50 years has had bipartisan support as one of

the primary sources of money to purchase land for public recreation and conservation. But that's another story.

At this point, the concern is what five Camden County commissioners will do next. If they approve the zoning change, Jerry Brandon believes it will be the first step toward ruining Cumberland Island.

"I think it's a terrible mistake to even consider doing this," Brandon said. "To me, it's like building condos in Yellowstone."

Camden County Board of Commissioners

Next meeting: Tuesday, April 4, 6 p.m.

Where: 200 East Fourth Street, Courthouse Square, Woodbine, Ga. 31569
(Government Services Complex, Second Floor, Room 252)

Website: <http://www.co.camden.ga.us/80/Commissioners>

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Save Cumberland Island info: <https://www.facebook.com/SaveCumberlandIsland/>