

September 25, 2024

Dear Sapelo Island Residents and Property Owners:

This letter is in response to the meeting held on August 23, 2024, in which the Sapelo Island Heritage Authority (SIHA) and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) gave updates and discussed issues regarding Sapelo Island. I would like to thank everyone who attended the meeting and those that provided public comment. Many topics were discussed, and it is the goal of DNR to follow-up on these items and provide timely responses. Below you will find a list of these items and additional information.

First, I would like to take the opportunity to highlight the accomplishments of both the SIHA and DNR over the past year.

### **2023-2024 SIHA Accomplishments**

#### **Fire Mitigation and Ditch Draining Work**

At the 2023 community meeting, concerns were raised regarding the risk of fire and ditch drainage issues surrounding the Hog Hammock community. Based on these concerns, I requested state appropriations on behalf of the Sapelo Island Heritage Authority to address the fire mitigation issues. These funds were appropriated in the AFY24 budget for the purpose of mitigation on SIHA property and Wildlife Management Area lands totaling more than 80 acres. Earlier this summer, mulching efforts began and as of today, approximately 40% has been completed. The initial reconnaissance of the ditch network was also completed earlier this summer between DNR and contractors. Additionally, there has been a request from McIntosh County for a grant from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for ditch work.

#### **Improved Communication and Transparency**

The Sapelo Island Heritage Authority webpage can be found here: <https://gadnr.org/sapelo-island-heritage-authority>. This will serve as a landing page for all things Sapelo Island and will include meeting notices and all communications from the SIHA and DNR. To improve responsiveness and better manage concerns, a dedicated email address has been set up and will be monitored closely. Moving forward, all concerns, questions, or feedback can be sent to [SIHAccomments@dnr.ga.gov](mailto:SIHAccomments@dnr.ga.gov).

### **SIHA Meeting Held on July 17, 2024**

On July 17, 2024, the Sapelo Island Heritage Authority held its first meeting since 2021. This meeting was held in Atlanta and an online viewing option was made available. The following items were adopted by the SIHA at the meeting:

- Recommendation to approve the Settlement Agreement between Marion and Roberta Banks and the Sapelo Island Heritage Authority for the exchange of real property.
- Recommendation to decline to exercise the Right of First Refusal as to conveyance of .12 acres of the total .63 acres lot in Hog Hammock on Sapelo Island, Georgia from Penny Butler Rossiter to Gretch and Danny Caudill.
- Recommendation to approve the SIHA give the Department of Natural Resources the authority to enter into 2-to-3 year agreements through a competitive application process for the use of Hog Hammock lots 18X and 19X for the purpose of preserving cultural heritage, education spaces, and/or agriculture of Sapelo Island.

*\*A more detailed description of the land-use agreement process can be found later in this letter.*

### **2023-2024 DNR Accomplishments**

#### **Ferry Progress**

The Katie Underwood underwent a scheduled hull inspection and returned to service earlier this summer. The Katie is currently having bearings installed and must complete a sea trial before returning to service. We anticipate having The Katie back in service next week.

DNR also purchased and installed Automated External Defibrillators (AED) units on the Marsh Landing dock and the ferry.

DNR continues to work with the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) and design contractors to acquire and update infrastructure needed for an electric ferry. DNR, with support from GDOT, applied for a \$11.2M EPA grant to provide the needed funding to complete this project. These awards should be announced later in September.

#### **New Staffing at Reynold's Mansion**

Over the last year, several new hires have occurred at Reynold's Mansion, which is managed by our State Parks and Historic Sites Division:

- Cade Harp, Park Manager
- Matthew Morrow, Assistant Park Manager
- Connie Keller, Event Coordinator
- Michael Marcotte, Park Maintenance Ranger

#### **Emergency Generator for Community Water System**

DNR has worked with Georgia Emergency Management and Homeland Security Agency and Federal Emergency Management Agency to obtain funding for an emergency generator for the community water

system. The 36kW diesel generator will be on a trailer and deployed to Azalea Field during heavy weather events like hurricanes. This generator will be dedicated to the water system and will help ensure that safe drinking water is provided even if power loss occurs at the well. DNR has a long-term upgrade plan for the community water system and will continue to seek funding for this enhancement.

### **Boardwalk, Trails, and Pavilions**

The Dean Creek Nature Trail, a natural surface/boardwalk trail leading to the beach, was damaged after a king-tide. The Department of Administrative Services has given DNR permission to repair and/or replace the damaged section. Work will occur this fall, along with additional improvements from the damage back to the trailhead, which will include new boardwalks and a new overlook.

The Nanny Goat Pavilion and boardwalk located at the beach are in poor shape and in need of complete replacement. Funding has been appropriated for this effort in the FY25 budget and the design, engineering and permitting phase will begin this fall.

### **Roads**

DNR has met with GDOT staff to estimate paving needs on the island. Our first priority will be the one-mile section from Marsh Landing to the crossroad. GDOT will complete the work if DNR can secure funding for the barge runs.

DNR will continue to partner with McIntosh County by providing barge space for equipment to conduct necessary road repairs and maintenance.

### **Sapelo Island Wildlife Management Area (WMA)**

Habitat restoration work continues in earnest along King Savanna Road, with WMA staff currently roller chopping large blocks of understory of palmetto, gallberry, and other highly combustible fuels. This work will encourage natural recruitment of longleaf pine. There has also been significant road work on the WMA to address flooding roads along the east side of the island. High rainfall and extreme tidal events have increasingly covered these roads with water.

### **Follow-up Items from Meeting**

The following discussion items were raised during the August 23, 2024, meeting and I would like to provide further clarification and/or follow-up.

### **Role of the Sapelo Island Heritage Authority**

The Sapelo Island Heritage Authority was established by the General Assembly in 1983 for the purpose of preserving the culture in the endangered historic area of Sapelo Island. The Authority is made up of five members – the Governor (Chair), the Commissioner of DNR, the Executive Director of the State Properties Commission and two residents of the community of Hog Hammock. The primary function of the SIHA over the past 41 years has been to buy and maintain land on Sapelo Island. Currently, the Authority manages 80 acres surrounding the Hog Hammock community.

Historically, the SIHA has convened to discuss matters related to land purchase, swaps and rights of refusal. The meetings must be called by the Governor, who serves as the Chairman. As a member, the Commissioner of DNR has a vote, but does not have the power to convene a meeting, appoint members or appropriate funds.

### **SIHA Land-Use Rental Agreement Explanation**

At the meeting of the SIHA on July 17, 2024, the Authority voted to permit the rental of Lots 18X and 19X to interested parties for cultural heritage, educational, and/or agricultural purposes. This approval gives DNR the authority to establish an application process and formulate policies and procedures for the rental agreement, but the SIHA will maintain complete ownership of both lots. The land-use agreements for Lots 18X and 19X will serve as a pilot program with the potential for additional available lots to be added in the future.

The Authority chose to allow the rental of Lots 18X and 19X for 2-3 year agreements for several reasons:

- The Concept Plan created by *eightvillage* specifically mentions the importance of cultural heritage, educational and agricultural spaces for self-sustaining the Gullah-Geechee culture in Hog Hammock.
- Lots 18X and 19X were recommended because both are in an upland area with an existing easement in place from Hall Road. These areas were both mulched during the summer of 2024 which improved both visibility and access making all three potential uses would be possible on these lots.
- The recommendation for 2-3 year agreements aims to ensure that renters fulfill their commitments and if they do not meet the obligations, it allows for the opportunity for others to apply once the agreement concludes. Per state regulations, an agreement over five years creates the presumption of an estate for years and would require additional approval.

Before the meeting on August 23, 2024, a list of questions was submitted to DNR and responses to those questions were addressed at the meeting. A written copy of the questions and responses can be found on the SIHA website: <https://gadnr.org/sapelo-island-heritage-authority>.

DNR is committed to working with the residents of Sapelo Island to create the rental agreement application process and policies. As stated in the meeting, allowing DNR to oversee the administrative aspects of creating the application and policies will take the burden off the SIHA, which has no administrative support or support staff.

### **Community Advisory Board Creation**

As stated above, DNR is committed to working with the residents of Sapelo Island to address community concerns. We would encourage the community to create a Community Advisory Board or working group to provide input to this process and feedback to DNR as we develop the land-use agreements. Additionally, DNR would be open to meeting with such a group concerning other issues if the group requested a meeting.

### **Island Clean Up on DNR Property**

DNR staff are actively working to move asphalt out of Bush Camp Field. Some of the larger concrete (without rebar) will be used by the contractor for shoreline stabilization during the upcoming boat hoist and barn creek dock project. The remaining concrete will need to be hauled off the island in large containers and

we are working on estimates for this work with our contract vendor. Bush Camp Field will no longer be used to stockpile materials moving forward and should be aesthetically pleasing for island residents and guests. Staff are actively working through the administrative process to remove the school bus from Skeet Field and awaiting surplus approval for DNR vehicles currently located at the overflow area on the mainland.

The estimated timeline to clean up the Bush Camp Field site and finalize the surplus process for the existing vehicles at the Meridian overflow lot is June 2025.

### **DNR Staff and Roles**

It was requested that DNR provide a list of staff members who attended the meeting and provide details on their job responsibilities.

Walter Rabon, Commissioner

Commissioner Rabon is responsible for overseeing the statewide management and conservation of Georgia's natural, historic, and cultural resources, including fish and wildlife, land conservation, and coastal resources. As Commissioner, Rabon also serves on the Sapelo Island Heritage Authority.

[Commissioner.DNR@dnr.ga.gov](mailto:Commissioner.DNR@dnr.ga.gov)

Thomas Barnard, Deputy Commissioner of Operations

Deputy Commissioner Barnard oversees the four DNR divisions – Parks and Historic Sites, Wildlife Resources, Coastal Resources, and Law Enforcement.

[Thomas.Barnard@dnr.ga.gov](mailto:Thomas.Barnard@dnr.ga.gov)

Trevor Santos, Deputy Commissioner of External Affairs

Deputy Commissioner Santos oversees DNR's public and governmental affairs, marketing and communications, grants, and real estate office.

[Trevor.Santos@dnr.ga.gov](mailto:Trevor.Santos@dnr.ga.gov)

Taylor Fisher, Chief of Staff

Ms. Fisher supports the DNR senior leadership by managing office operations, facilitating communication and collaboration across the agency, and overseeing department initiatives. She is also the point of contact for the SIHA and manages the website and email.

[Taylor.Fisher@dnr.ga.gov](mailto:Taylor.Fisher@dnr.ga.gov)

Angie Johnson, Director of the State Parks and Historic Sites

Director Johnson is responsible for overseeing Georgia's 63 state parks and historic sites, two state historic visitor's center and one train. The State Parks and Historic Sites Division is responsible for the management and daily operations of Reynold's Mansion.

[Angie.Johnson@dnr.ga.gov](mailto:Angie.Johnson@dnr.ga.gov)

Ted Will, Director of the Wildlife Resources Division

Director Will is responsible for conserving and promoting fishing, hunting and wildlife resource management, education and scientific research. The Wildlife Resources Division oversees the Sapelo Island ferry operations and the 9,000-acre Wildlife Management Area on Sapelo Island.

[Ted.Will@dnr.ga.gov](mailto:Ted.Will@dnr.ga.gov)

Doug Haymans, Director of the Coastal Resources Division

Director Haymans oversees the management of Georgia's marshes, beaches, coastal waters and marine fisheries. The Coastal Resources division's service area extends from the inland reach of tidal flow to three miles into the Atlantic Ocean.

[Doug.Haymans@dnr.ga.gov](mailto:Doug.Haymans@dnr.ga.gov)

Again, I would like to thank the residents who attended the meeting. I look forward to working with you in the future.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Walter Rabon', written in black ink.

Walter Rabon