

Dear Residents and Property Owners of Sapelo Island:

This letter is intended to provide a summary of the recent community meeting between the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Sapelo Island Heritage Authority (SIHA) and the residents and landowners on August 11, 2025, and to acknowledge the concerns and questions raised during the meeting. We want to ensure that the information discussed is shared as broadly as possible.

Before addressing specific issues that were raised during the public comment portion of the meeting, I would like to highlight the recently compiled Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for Sapelo Island. As Director Will stated during the meeting, these SOPs are a living document and outline how DNR's Wildlife Resources Division and Game Management Section operate on the island. The purpose of SOPs is to provide greater clarity, consistency and transparency in how decisions are made, and responsibilities are carried out concerning issues such as, but not limited to, the use of dirt on private land, the procedures for public and group tours, DNR communications to island residents, and guidelines for the use of docks. As a living document, it will continue to be reviewed and refined as circumstances change and as we receive feedback from residents and stakeholders. The SOPs can be requested through the Island Manager, Fred Hay, or reviewed at DNR's Long Tabby office.

Additionally, I would like to address the Rental Policy and Application Process for Sapelo Island Heritage Authority (SIHA) Lots 18X and 19X. At the July 17, 2024, meeting of the SIHA, the Authority voted to allow the rental of Lots 18X and 19X to interested parties for cultural heritage, educational, and/or agricultural purposes. The approval gave DNR the authority to establish an application process and formulate policies and procedures for the rental agreement.

A copy of the Rental Policy, Application, and Evaluation Process were distributed at the meeting and can be found at <http://gadnr.org/sapelo-island>. The rental policy ensures that the activities of SIHA properties are consistent with the mission of preserving the past cultural and historic values of the Hog Hammock community for present and future generations. Per the policy, the application period will open on September 1, 2025, and run for two months. All applications will be evaluated using the Use Agreement Criteria by a review plan consisting of five residents of the community of Hog Hammock, selected by the current residents serving as members of the SIHA.

The rental policy agreements for Lots 18X and 19X will serve as a pilot program with potential for additional available lots to be added in the future. These lots were specifically chosen because they are in an upland area, were recently mulched, and have existing access via an easement to Hall Road. The 2-3 year timeframe was approved to ensure that renters fulfill their commitments, allowing opportunities for others if obligations aren't met. At this time, changing the lot locations or extending the lease terms beyond what was approved by the SIHA would require a new vote by the SIHA.

The following items were brought up at the meeting on August 11, 2025, and I would like to address those issues and provide further clarification and follow-up.

We heard your concerns about the conditions of the roads and needs for maintenance across the island. Safety, drainage, and accessibility remain priorities for DNR. We will continue to work closely with the Georgia Department of Transportation and McIntosh County to clarify responsibilities, coordinate maintenance, and advance needed improvements. Where projects are already underway, we will provide updates to the community as timelines are established. For future projects, we will also continue to communicate criteria for prioritization so that residents understand how decisions are made.

Concerns were also raised regarding new developments, dock construction and vehicle access to the beach. We want to reaffirm that all decisions in these areas are guided by established policies and DNR Board rule. With respect to beach driving permits, we do recognize that this continues to be an important and ongoing issue on Sapelo Island. As a reminder, when issuing these permits, the Department follows the rules set by the DNR Board. While applicants may apply as members of an LLC, DNR does not qualify permits based on LLC documentation. Instead, we require adequate proof of property ownership or a valid use agreement before a permit is granted. Regarding the construction of private docks, there has been an application for a permit for a private dock, but that application has not received final approval from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. We will continue to ensure the permit applications are reviewed consistently, with an emphasis on transparency and compliance with policy.

We received several comments via email concerning the Sunday ferry schedule. A survey was available to all residents and landowners to give input to the ferry schedule. That survey is now closed, and results will be compiled and shared in the coming weeks.

Lastly, I'd like to address our response to safety following the gangway collapse last fall. Following the October 19, 2024, tragedy, DNR immediately began to assess all gangways on DNR properties across the state. An internal committee was formed to create

the Elevated Structures Standard Operating Procedure. As stated in the Procedure, regular safety and integrity assessments are crucial for all elevated structures on DNR state public properties, and DNR staff are responsible for ensuring that all elevated structures are assessed and maintained according to the Procedure. All elevated structures must be assessed annually by DNR staff while any structures ranked as Category 1 must be inspected annually by a Registered Structural Engineer. Following any major weather events or any unusual condition that could negatively impact the structure, an additional documented assessment must be conducted.

As stated in the meeting, I have an open-door policy and as Commissioner, I encourage Sapelo Island residents and landowners to reach out directly with questions, concerns, or suggestions. Your voices are essential, and we welcome ongoing dialogue outside of scheduled meetings. Following our 2024 community meeting, we created the Sapelo Island Heritage Authority webpage to improve internal communication and transparency. This page (<http://gadnr.org/sapelo-island>) serves as a landing page for all things Sapelo Island and will include meeting notices and all communication from SIHA and DNR. Additionally, residents and landowners can email [SIHAcomments@dnr.ga.gov](mailto:SIHAcomments@dnr.ga.gov) with all concerns, issues, questions, and feedback. All meeting notices will continue to be posted on the website, sent out through the Sapelo Island listserv via email, and posted at our offices on the island. We are committed to regular updates, continued dialogue, and shared problem-solving.

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

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Walter Rabon".

Walter Rabon