

Amendments to HB273 puts two descendants of Thomas Spalding slaves on Sapelo Island Heritage Authority

By Kathleen Russell

HB273 was introduced by Representative Buddy DeLoach (R-Townsend) in the Georgia House on March 2 to make changes in the composition of the Sapelo Island Heritage Authority, which is a five member board. Currently, the Governor serves as chair; the DNR Commissioner serves as vice chair; and the other three members include the executive director of State Properties' Commission; the Commissioner of Human Relations; and a resident of Hog Hammock community.

The Sapelo Island Heritage Authority was created to govern the property the state owns in the Hog Hammock community.

The bill was introduced to make the DNR Commissioner chairman of the authority, because of time constraints on the Governor's schedule to be able to meet more frequently. And, that the Governor appoint someone to as vice chair. The executive director of State Properties Commission serves as secretary/treasurer; remove the Commissioner of Human Relations; and have two residents of Hog Hammock.

Sponsors of the bill include Representatives Al Williams, Rick Townsend and Jesse Petrea; and Senator Mike Hodges.

Upon discovering the bill had passed through the house and was now in the Senate, several Sapelo Island organizations, including Save Our Legacy Ourself, Sapelo Island Cultural and Revitalization Society and the Hog Hammock Foundation, as well as 100 Miles, asked for changes in the bill to further protect the Gullah Geechee culture of the



Senate Committee hears about House Bill 273, introduced by Rep. Buddy DeLoach (R-Townsend) to make changes in the composition of the Sapelo Island Heritage Authority. (Photo GA Senate)

Hog Hammock community.

It was asked that the bill be amended to require the Governor's appointment to be the head of a state agency or a state elected official, instead of the Governor being able to appoint anyone, and as 100 Miles describes, "even a donor to his campaign or someone with interest in owning land on Sapelo."

That person appointed by the Governor "who has the intent of the SIHA at heart and whom the descendants living on Sapelo can hold accountable."

And, to further define the two residents of Hog Hammock, those two resident descendants would be of the 44 families of former slave descendants of Thomas Spalding.

The senate committee hearing was held on Wednesday, March 15. Rep. DeLoach, chairman of the House Ethics Committee, was absent due to attending ethics training. Rep. Petrea stood in at the committee meeting, and DNR Commissioner Mark Williams attended.

Commissioner Williams gave the Senate Committee background on the SIHA.

"This is some historical information about the Sapelo Island Heritage

Authority, because there's a lot of confusion out there for what it actually does. So, when the state purchased the island, they purchased it in two sales. The first sale was about 15,560-something acres. And that's the bulk of the island, which is a wildlife

me. I just said, 'Well, if we switch roles with a governor's busy schedule, the Authority can be more reactive, because I have the authority (as chairman of SIHA), now I can call the meetings. I can have meetings on the island. So that was the genesis of the



Georgia DNR Commissioner Mark Williams, left, speaks to the Senate Committee explaining the reason for the changes. Rep. Jesse Petrea is shown on the right. (Photo GA Senate)

management area. Within that bulk is one big mansion what was R.J. Reynolds' mansion and we run that as a state park bed and breakfast.

"Within that 16,000-acre island, there is a community called Hog Hammock. On the second sale from R.J. Reynolds' widow, the state purchased lots within the community—little lots and some four-acre lots. It was the second sale that this board was created just in their sole purpose to govern the rights and make decisions just on the lots the state owns. I've heard folks say the authority needs to do something about the ferry. They don't have any role. DNR manages all the day-to-day operations, the water systems, the food and the ferry. The county manages the trash.

"When I met down there at my last (SIHA) town hall meeting, what I heard was in some of it that there was confusion of our (SIHA) role and I've tried to clear that up at the meeting. We need to have more meetings. So, this idea came solely from

bill.

A committee member asked, "So, just to clarify, we're making the change because you want kind of more hands on immediately. You can do it faster?"

Commissioner Williams responded: "Yes, ma'am. We managed the island day-in-and-day-out, ferry system and everything. Now, it won't be the role of this board to be involved with that. But, right now, I have a request from a resident just to farm three acres or maybe four. He

just wants to set up a little farm (on the state-owned land). It's vacant land that the state owns that this board is over. I'd like to call a meeting. I may have somebody come and say they are having a wedding this weekend. Can they use lots for a wedding. I am making it up. Different requests like that are just easier for me to call. And, the governor still has a busy schedule, no matter who the governor is."

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Townsend Church of God Spring Fling

April 1, 2023

12 - 4 p.m.

Please join us for our Spring Fling at 1231 Church of God Rd., NW Townsend, GA

We will have an Easter Egg Hunt, Games and a Bounce House for the kids

We will have hotdogs, hamburgers, chips and drinks for everyone

Attention McIntosh Property Owner (Site Visit) Greetings from the McIntosh Board of Assessors,

In accordance with O.C.G.A. 46-5-254.1, please be advised that the McIntosh County Property Appraisal Staff may be visiting your property to review your parcel information. Said property visit will be for the purpose of determining the correctness of the information contained in the county's appraisal record for the property.

Possible purposes of visits include:

- Appeal Filed on Property
- Construction of a new improvement or addition
- Countywide Property Review Process

"The County wide review is regulated by the State of Georgia Department of Revenue's Appraisal Procedures Manual, 540-15-10-001 (1/1/2000), which states, 'All real property parcels should be physically reviewed at least once every three years to ascertain that property information records are current.'"

Appraisers of the McIntosh County Tax Assessor's Office are handling the reviewing. They will have badges for identification. They will also be in County vehicles or private vehicles marked accordingly. If a resident is at home when the appraiser visit, the appraiser will verify the property information that the county has on file. They will not enter the residence unless invited in to view changes to the property information. They will conduct an outside inspection of all residences and all outbuildings on the property. The appraisers will be taking pictures of the front and back of the structures. These field reviews are required by Georgia law to be conducted every 3-4 years to ensure that property descriptions, construction, and amenities are properly recorded. You can ask the appraiser to leave your property, however, state law gives the chief appraiser or designee the right to "go upon the property outside of buildings, parked or otherwise, in order to carry out the duty of making appraisals. Appraisers will ask questions regarding the interior finish in order to make the best determination of value but cannot enter without your approval. Should you decide not to approve interior, a value will still be developed for your property, but the likelihood that the value would be incorrect is increased. If a resident is not at home when the appraiser visit, they will conduct an outside inspection and leave a card/dialer hanger informing the residents that they were there.

All appraisers will be checking for mobile/manufactured home decals. They must be displayed somewhere readily accessible by the appraiser.

The appraisers will not go through or over a locked gate. They will leave a card/dialer hanger on the gate if feasible. If resident has a locked gate, the resident is asked to call the McIntosh County Tax Assessor's Office Dept. at 912-437-6663 to schedule an appointment to meet the appraiser on site. The Board of Assessors would like to thank the Citizens of McIntosh County for assisting us in our effort to keep assessments fair and equitable!



Jazz Watts, a descendant of Sapelo Island, requested that the wording in HB 273 be changed in the adding two Hog Hammock residents to the authority to be two descendants of the 44 enslaved families of Thomas Spalding. The Senate Committee agreed to accept the amendment. (Photo GA Senate)

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Senator Nikki Merritt brought up questions about defining two resident appointees. "I have concerns and those in the community have concerns because now we have people moving into the island that are not descendants of the Gullah. So, I'm trying to be respectful of those residents there. We're afraid of gentrification and people now trying to claim residency. You know, they've been living there two years or whatever. We want to make sure we're being sensitive and maybe we have some type of residency require-

ment. I would like to see it say something like the descendants of enslaved people or you have to have lived her x amount of time before you can claim residency. I would like to see those two things so we can safeguard..."

Williams explained there was a process by which a person becomes a resident, and receives the privileges offered by the state to those residents.

There was also a long discussion about how to know someone is actually a biological descendant of Thomas Spalding's enslaved families who lived on the island.

Senator Emanuel Jones made a motion to add the word, descendant to the amendment.

Senator Petrea said,

"I am quite certain that Representative DeLoach would not have a problem with this amendment. It sounds to me like this is the intention anyway. It may be better to simply amend the bill by adding descendants as Senator Jones first recommended by adding resident descendants. I am quite confident when I get back to Rep. DeLoach that he will be pleased.

Josiah "Jazz" Watts, a descendant of Sapelo Island, asked to speak and was granted two minutes.

"I am a descendant from the island and I just want to let you know again, we didn't know anything about this bill. I actually drove all night to get here to be able to speak to you. So, I wish I had more

than two minutes, but I'll do the best I can. We did reach out to both Representative Williams and had a call, but the bill still went forward and it had no changes and to have our descendant at a call yesterday with Rep. DeLoach. And, we were told that won't be any changes, but there are two things that we are concerned about.

"One is the issue that you're talking about. The issue of descendants, and what we would ask is that line 30 would change to specify specifically to say the descendants of those enslaved from Thomas Spalding from those 44 families. So, I think that can clearly dictate the definition of descendants for us, and also the other

change that we wanted to see is with the governor appointing a designee, we wanted to make sure that the person is an elected official, or an agency representative under the governor so that person can be held accountable, not only to the voters of Georgia, but also to the voters that live within the community and the descendants within the community. So, we were asking for those specific changes. The thing that I would say is I want us all to work together here and I'm new to this entire process. I just found out about this just a few weeks ago, so I'm still trying to catch up. We've had a lot of support, 100 Miles has been supporting us. We have these letters from nonprofit or-

ganizations SICARs, Hog Hammock Community Foundation and also Save Our Legacy Ourselves organization, and a member of the Authority, Franny Bailey, who Commissioner Williams did speak with.

"Within just two weeks, we mobilized so that we could respond to this. I would like to see those updated changes to amend the bill. If that doesn't happen, we would ask that it gets tabled."

The motion passed to amend with the substitute wording. Merritt asked to table the bill until proper wording was provided, but it died for a lack of a second.

Senator Mike Hodges (R-Brunswick) will carry the bill in the Senate.