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

By Kathleen Reewell
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.

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 Susan Petrie. 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 island. The end result was that the bill’s author, a resident of Hog Hammock, requested the bill’s language be revised to make it more inclusive of the Gullah Geechee community.

The Senate Committee approves the bill, but the Governor’s appointment to the Senate committee is 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 interest of the SIHA at heart and whom the descendents living on Sapelo can hold accountable.”

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

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. Petrie was in attendance.

Commissioner Mark Williams attended.

Commissioner Williams gave the Senate Committee a background on the bill.

“Sapelo Island Heritage Authority, because there’s a lot of confusion out there what it actually does. So, when the state purchased the island, they purchased it in two sales. The first one was about 15,560 acres; the second was about 7,560 acres. And that’s the bulk of the island, which is a wildlife area. 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 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 fix these acres or maybe here.”

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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. 48-5-244.1, please be advised that the McIntosh County Property Assessor’s Office will be visiting your property to review your property 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:

- Appraisal Rule for Property
- Construction of a new improvement or addition
- Countywide Property Review Process

The County-wide review is conducted by the State of Georgia, Department of Revenue, Appraiser Procedures Manual, 509-1:10-0981 (17) (D) (O.1), which states, “All real property parcels shall be physically reviewed at least once every three years to ascertain that property information records are current.”

Appraiser’s 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 in private vehicle 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 to view changes to the property information. They will conduct an outside inspection of all buildings and all outbuildings on the property. The appraiser 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 amendments are properly recorded. You can ask the appraiser to leave your property; however, state law gives the chief assessor or designer the right to “go upon the property outside of buildings, posted or otherwise, in order to carry out the duty of making an appraisal.” Appraisers will ask questions regarding the interior of your property in order to make the best determination of value, but cannot enter without your approval. Should you decide not to allow an appraiser’s inspection, a letter will be submitted to your property for approval, the letter will be submitted to the property owner, but the likelihood that the letter will be in the future is minimal. If a resident is not at home when the appraiser visit, they will conduct an outside inspection and take a certificate of survey informing the residents that they have a letter in the mail.

All appraiser will be checking for mobile/manufactured home details. They must be displayed somewhere easily accessible by the appraiser.

The appraiser will not go through or over a locked gate. They will leave a card/door 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 912-637-4663 to schedule an appointment to meet the appraiser on site. The Board of Assessors would like to schedule an appointment for an appraiser in an effort to keep assessments fair and equitable.
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Senator Nikki Merritt brought up questions about defining two residency 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 requirement."

I would like to see it say something like the descendants of enslaved people or you have to have lived here a certain 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.

"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 organizations SIGARs, 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 90 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.