

Operator sought for Sapelo Community Center

Lotson opposes, wants County to hire staff

The recently \$350,000 renovated Sapelo Island Community Center, owned by McIntosh County, is located in Hog Hammock. The question as to whom and how it would be operated has been a debate. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources said it did not want to take over the general operation.

During a Special Called Meeting of the McIntosh County Commissioners on Thursday, Oct. 19, there was a split vote concerning issuing a request for proposals (RFP) for the general operation of the center, with the chair breaking the tie. At the table were all commissioners, including Chair David Stevens, Roger Lotson, William Harrell, Kate Karwacki and Davis Poole.

For background, the Community Center was constructed in 1988 and was intended to provide services to seniors in the community,



The front porch of the recently renovated Sapelo Community Center is pictured. McIntosh County is seeking proposals from prospective operators of the community center, located in Hog Hammock. (Photo provided)

including nutritious meals. In the past, the facility has been utilized as a voting precinct house and a meeting place to discuss political issues and other matters. Keys were distributed to community members, and the building was used by various parties for numerous, widely-varied purposes.

The RFP stated, "Unfortunately, a maintenance plan was neither requested or questioned. In a 2014 HUD

Fair Housing Investigation, the investigative staff found the building to be in poor condition, with rotting food in the kitchen area, and floors in need of repair. The septic tank/system had collapsed. Windows were broken and the building was left unsecured. Subsequently, Hurricanes Matthew and Irma contributed to an already weakened structure. On more than one occasion demolition was discussed as an alternative

to rebuilding the structure.

"Despite discussions of demolition, in 2022-2023 the board of Commissioners invested significant sums of ARPA monies in the facility, with a 'vision' or plan to use at least a portion of the building to provide health services, including healthy meals for seniors and health services from a sub-vendor, such as Coastal Community Health Services. Additionally, it was

anticipated that the building could return to its original intent of being a gathering place for the community, a location where 2-3 kiosks could be included to sell locally-made items, and a place where visitors and residents alike could enjoy a meal and/or beverages at a reasonable price. Voting in the various elections will continue to be held at the facility, and it would serve as an operations center for the local emergency management agency

in the case of a disaster."

The 15-page RFP was reviewed by County Manager Patrick Zoucks during the meeting that was held in the City Hall, with the room filled, mainly with Hog Hammock constituents.

Two rooms of the center would be reserved for medical services and other uses designated by the Commissioners, and there

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would be room to hold elections.

Specifics of the RFP included that the vendor submit a plan, with a five-year agreement. The vendor will be responsible for maintenance of the interior of the building, including utilities, and maintenance of the lawn, while the County would be responsible for maintenance of the exterior of the building.

The vendor would provide appliances to equip and maintain the kitchen, and offer minimum full service during lunch three days a week and dinner two days a week.

The two kiosks were defined and 50% of the items had to be made or grown on Sapelo.

There are options that include the vendor obtaining alcohol licenses and serving alcohol in the center. The vendor may choose to participate in festivals and celebrations on the island.

The county has the right to use the facility for meetings with a 14-day notice and must pay a \$150 cleaning fee. The vendor shall not use the facility for political rallies or political events. If the vendor wants to make structural improvements, it would be desirable and preferential to have engineered drawings.

The selected vendor will be required to provide a security deposit of \$10,000, have no less than \$2 million liability insurance policy, and would pay rent.

Following Zoucks providing a summary of the proposed RFP, Sapelo Island's Commissioner Roger Lotson addressed the subject.

"I still think that the best thing for all involved is for the county to hire staff to run the center. That being said, my overall concern with the proposal that is in front of me...It is probably pretty clear that none of the descendant organizations on the island will be a competitor for this proposal for the following reasons."

Lotson said they probably couldn't come up with the engineering drawings, while they are not required, but engineering drawing would get preferential treatment.

The requirement of \$10,000 security deposit would limit the number of applicants being able to do that, as well as the \$2 million insurance policy being a prohibiting factor for a number of organizations on the island.

"Then the big one..." Lotson said, "the vendor will be responsible for paying rent on the facility. Obviously in my mind, the one that's able to pay the most rent will have a greater chance of winning

the bid...It will continue the perception that some of the descendants have been—some of the other land owners have that this is continuation of some form of retaliation or for some further way of reducing the availability of assets that they've enjoyed through the years. They will interpret this as now they may have to go to newcomers to be able to use a facility that they used to have access to."

"...At some point in time, the land in which the center is built was given to them by an organization on the island and now that same piece of land and that same facility to some degree is going to be taken from them and that's going to rub them the wrong way. While I do see why the county wants to do it, it allows a number of things that the county wants to do. But at the same time, it will have a negative impact on those out on the island..."

Lotson named other concerns and then said, "Those things bring concerns to me and so I then would encourage my fellow Commissioners to instead of going this route to go the route of seeing if we can hire individuals so that we can retain a continued possession of that property and have greater control of that property."

Stevens replied, "I'll address several things that you said. To begin with, you and I've discussed that building many, many times over the years. You and I've met personally over there and walked through with contractors and staff. And, Commissioner, it comes as a little bit of surprise to me that you would say that you're opposed to looking for a vendor now, when over the years, you've agreed over and over as recently as two months that we have no business trying to run that building, and that we needed to go out for bid, when we were approaching the state about the state possibly leasing the building. And, you were in full agreement and that seems to change now."

"Just to hit some of the items that you just touched on—the engineer drawings, that's only in the event that somebody wants to alter our building. Okay, that doesn't say that that's required...I don't see that inhibits anybody in any way, unless they want to make a structural change to our building."

"The security deposit is not \$10,000 cash. It can be, but it can be a letter of credit. And, that's nothing but a piece of paper...I don't see anybody putting up \$10,000 cash. Okay, insurance of \$2 million liability is a liability policy and there's nothing to prevent somebody from leasing that building. And then, the vendor will be



The Sapelo Island Community Center is pictured as construction to renovate the building began. (Provided photo)



The new kitchen at the Sapelo Island Community Center is pictured. (Provided photo)



The rear of the Sapelo Island Community Center is pictured after recent renovations there were completed. (Provided photo)

responsible for paying rent. I don't see how else if we're going to lease out a county building... how else we would expect someone not to pay rent on the county building?"

"And then the last thing I'll say is we can reject any and all bids. This is a request for proposal. Let's just see where it goes, see what kind of proposals we get. If we don't like it, we vote it down. If it looks like something that we can live with, we vote it up. That's pretty much wraps up my comments."

Lotson replied, "I would

like to explain my change in what you perceive as a change and the requesting for bids. I don't necessarily oppose the RFP...I feel that the better option will be hiring someone, but the RFP in front of me, I think those with the deeper pockets will be better positioned to win the bid. While nothing is prohibiting anyone from doing it. But, when those that sit around the table start weighing the various RFPs, if any are submitted, we don't know that for right now. When you start adding up the

various things, the cost of the rent, the \$2 million liability insurance, the deposit in whatever form it might be, to be able to staff that kitchen within 90 days and running. All of those things put together, I suspect that those that make decisions when they look at all the applications that come in front of them that it would come clear and evident which one

will rise to the top and which one will not even be considered because of the difference in the quality of the paperwork and the ability of the individual to do what they're doing. So, that was what made me concerned about the RFP that's presented."

There was more discussion. When Stevens

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The Sapelo Island Community Center is pictured after renovations were recently completed at the building. (Provided photo)

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called for a motion, Poole made the motion to approve the issuing of a RFP for the Sapelo Community Center Management. Karwacki made a second.

The vote was called. Poole and Karwacki voted yes. Lotson and Harrell voted no. Stevens voted yes, and the motion carried.

Following nine Hog Hammock residents filing suit against the five McIntosh County Commissioners on Oct. 12, asking the court

to stop the zoning amendment decision by the Commissioners to increase of residential square footage from 1,400 to 3,000 square feet, the Commissioners took action to hire the law firm of Jarrard & Davis LLP. The firm is located in Cumming. Poole made the motion to approve and Lotson seconded the motion. The vote was unanimous.

In other business, the Commission approved a resolution that urges the governor and the Georgia General Assembly to continue efforts in the 2024 Session to enhance Georgia citizens' access to vital mental health services, including the provision to state budgetary funding for additional behavioral

health crisis centers across the state, additional co-responder units, and other resources to assist those with mental health and substance abuse disorders.

Following a presentation by James McKinzie, a board member of the Georgia Commercial Fisherman's Association, the Commissioners passed a resolution recognizing the effects of shrimp dumping, which is the influx of foreign farm-raised shrimp on the local economy and recognizes that action needs to be taken to protect the local shrimping industry.

A contract amendment with Georgia Asphalt Producers was approved to add \$521,046.13 worth of work to the existing contract. Zoucks explained that the company is currently performing work for the county as part of the Year 2 TSPLOST projects to include resurfacing Youngman

Road, Sturgeon Road and Franklin Street. The additional funding will be for a portion of Rossville Road and Church of God Road, as part of the Year 3 TSPLOST projects. He said the original contract was bid out several months ago and pricing was very good.

Also, a contract amendment with Littlefield Construction was approved to add \$1,359,724.09 worth of work to the existing contract. The company is performing work as part of Year 2 TSPLOST projects including the paving of King Swamp Road, Blues Reach Road and Pine Hill Road. The additional funding will be for a portion of Rossville Road and Barrington Road as part of the Year 3 TSPLOST project. Zoucks also commented that the original contract was bid out several months ago and the pricing was very good.

