

McIntosh panel OKs island rezoning

The marsh island would change to residential, allowing houses to be built

By **TERRY DICKSON**
The Times-Union

DARIEN — For the third time, the McIntosh County Zoning and Planning Board has approved the controversial rezoning of a marsh island so its owners can build houses there.

The two previous rezonings from conservation-preservation to residential were set aside because of

mistakes, first because a county building official misstated the existing zoning of nine-acre Union Island and last month because owners Tim and Lee Garris failed to disclose that one of their partners had contributed to the campaign of a McIntosh County commissioner.

The third time was no more charming than the first two meetings on the subject as opponents accused the

zoning board of rubber-stamping any and all development proposals that come before them. It was no better from the other side. After listening to opposition, Tim Garris called it the usual environmental "hysteria."

McIntosh County's courtroom has kept its historic look and Tuesday night it had an old-time feel. With the room's air conditioner broken, electric box fans hummed and spectators opened windows to let in some cool night air. The heat didn't shorten the debate, however, as discussion on the single argument lasted more than an hour.

The arguments against the rezoning

remain unchanged since the first rezoning. Deborah Sheppard, executive director of the Altamaha Riverkeeper, summed up most of them. Sheppard said the zoning panel was under a special obligation to consider any impact that development may have on the salt marshes and tidal streams that surround it.

Sheppard questioned where the owners of the possible 18 houses would park their vehicles when they travel to the island by boat, the only access. Union Island is a short distance along the North River from Blue N Hall landing, where prospective property owners would launch

their boats.

Although environmentalists expressed the usual concerns of lawn chemicals, seepage from septic tanks and erosion from construction sites washing into the rivers and marshes, much of the opposition came from neighboring residents.

Henry Moore, who lives in the nearby Ridge community, said he uses the landing and doesn't want to get crowded out. There is so little parking at the landing, that vehicles and boat trailers often line the causeway leading to the launch site and

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dock.

Moore also worried about runoff from the island being carried into streams and the loss of the natural character.

"I think you need to be very, very careful to preserve the heritage of what we have," he said.

Paul Griffin, who lives in one of the Garrises' other developments, praised them for their past work. But Griffin asked the zoning board to consider balancing what he called the natural and social capital with that of investment.

"We can't squander one or two of these in favor of the other," Griffin said.

The county would be worse

off if the island were rezoned to allow development, he said.

Sharon Smith said building houses on a marsh island should not be considered reasonable growth and said she fears it will open the floodgates to similar requests.

The Garrises had some supporters such as Ginger Gordon, who said they have protected the environment in their past developments.

"They go above and beyond what it takes," Gordon said.

Gordon didn't attend the meeting just to praise the Garrises. In a previous vote, the planning board gave her permission to open a hardware store on what was previously residential property.

Former County Attorney

Adam Poppell III, whose brother Joe is a planning board member, said it was hypocrisy for many of the opponents to speak out against the development because some have done worse than the Garrises will.

"They've asked nothing more than to go by the rules," Poppell said.

The board voted 3-0 to approve the rezoning. The matter will go before the McIntosh County Commission on Tuesday, April 18, for final action.

Having made it past the

planning board for the third time, Lee Garris said most of the concerns are unfounded and said his company is unlikely to build the allowed two houses per acre.

"We'll probably build about 10," he said.

The development must still meet state requirements including buffers along wetlands and soil tests.

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