

Public agencies help county officials abuse a treasured scenic corridor

Since my letter to the Corps on July 26, described in an August 16th Islander article, the labyrinth of state and federal review of the Frederica Road realignment project has grown even more perplexing. These experiences could well serve as a case-study in the bureaucratic manipulation of facts and opportunistic neglect of adopted rules, particularly by disregarding obligations to honor requirements for public access to timely information.

The issue under immediate scrutiny is whether a ditch paralleling north Frederica Road – evidently as old as the road itself and therefore of potential historical significance – should be properly evaluated and protected under the National Historic Preservation Act. That federal legislation applies to this project due to a Corps permit that was required because relocating the road, near Christ Church, to the east entails destruction of wetlands that are protected under the federal Clean Water Act.

Furthermore, the relocated road would intrude on the marsh buffer and be dangerously close to an unstable area influenced by tidal waters that will cause increased flooding as sea-level continues to rise.

On September 9th my phone-call to Georgia's Historic Preservation Division [HPD] was returned by a staff-member, who described a 30-day review period they would follow once the Corps' provided its assessment. Yet, the next day I was emailed by the Corps saying they had already filed their findings with HPD on September 1. For some reason, apparently the HPD staff had either been unaware of it or was hiding that fact when they spoke with me.

Contrary to a 30-day review providing opportunity for public comment as had been assured by HPD staff, three days later HPD declared they would respond to the Corps review by the end of the week (September 17). When asked why the review was expedited, HPD staff simply said it was their "standard operating procedure" to avoid "holding up a project."

Further short-circuiting this alarmingly rapid review by HPD, on Wednesday (September 15) I learned they had already filed their review with the Corps the day before. So, a 30-day review had been truncated to 13 days (September 1 – September 14), with no provision for public comment.

In every instance, as a representative of the public I was only notified belatedly – usually after several attempts to get a response – without being provided any copy of a review when it had been completed. Evidently their ploy has been to stall, providing as little information as possible, as late as possible, to prevent unwanted public intervention, rushing a review process despite established requirements.

Considering that this project will potentially destroy historic artifacts and degrade a treasured scenic corridor by removing mature live-oak trees along Frederica Road, while imposing a parking lot in front of the iconic façade of Christ Church, the willful negligence of these public officials – who provided no opportunity for public comment – will unquestionably diminish the historic appeal of an area that has long made Saint Simons Island's character unique.

And it must not be forgotten that Glynn County is a partner in this debacle, assisting the church in promoting and implementing a project that's primarily motivated by a reckless, deteriorating tourism obsession.

When traveling along Frederica Road, as hulking tourist buses cluster around Christ Church, Glynn County taxpayers and voters should consider what they might have done to speak out against this fiasco locally – before it got into the hands of politically vulnerable, heedless bureaucrats.

~ David Kyler, Center for a Sustainable Coast