


CoffeeBreak

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COLUMN / TERRY DICKSON

A weekly column from an experienced journalist, photographer and storyteller.

'Battle of the Boatyard' is making waves

A few weeks ago I wrote about the big fight in the 1990s in which proponents of pumping dredged sand onto St. Simons Island's beach worked under the banner of Save Our Sand, or SOS. Opponents formed Save the Beach and, although no sand was pumped, a lot of mud was slung.

Welcome to Save the Boatyard.

At stake is a piece of property that sits between the bathhouses on the eastern edge of the parking lot at the county's former U.S. Coast Guard station. The Coastal Georgia Historical Society is turning the historic building into a museum about the war on the homefront during World War II. The big parking lot in front of it serves the largest single public beach access on the island.

The St. Simons Surf Sailors Club, which has been around since 1974, established the boatyard on the eastern edge of the parking lot 35 years ago.

The battle is over that fenced-in area the club leases from Glynn County where members pay \$350 a year to store their Hobie Cats, little single mast catamarans. There are also smaller leased spaces for kayaks, surfboards and sail boards. A committee has come up with a plan improve the county's dusty parking lot and its amenities. The boatyard may not be part of those plans, but the committee isn't saying and the club is not hopeful.

This fight will be a way with a lot of mud launched by way of Facebook. A quiz: Why did God send seven plagues before Pharaoh let Moses' people go? Because the Israelis didn't have Facebook.

Like most fights of this nature, there are some very good people on both sides, but feelings are getting hurt. Everybody on the other side is Kim Jung Un, except they're no longer looking across the table. The Surf Sailors say they've been shut of the process by a committee that won't even consider their alternative plans that would include giving up 80 linear feet of their leased area, rebuilding its structures and dressing it up.

Sherry Jones, executive director the historical society, will present the committee's plans for the Coast Guard station master plan to the County Commission at a work session March 20.

The proposal and study behind it won't cost the county anything, which some see as a plus, but others regard with suspicion.

Recreational sailing there doesn't cost the county anything, and it has spent millions providing recreational venues for swimming, soccer, base-

ball, football, softball, skateboarding and a lot on the facility to launch boats on Blythe Island.

Jones' history on the island goes back farther than many others who have enlisted in the fracas.

"My mom graduated from Glynn Academy during World War II," Jones said. "I've been coming here my entire life. I love this place. I don't want to change it."

But the surf sailors assert that is exactly what she, County Commissioner Peter Murphy, a relative newcomer to the island, and other members of the committee want to do. They figure the Historical Society wants the boatyard to be history.

Architect Robert Ussery, the club commodore who attended the early committee meetings, drew up an alternative plan. He has lost hope of being allowed to participate in spite of working on a lot of improvement projects in the past.

"Based on those (early) meetings, we felt comfortable we'd be included," he said.

But things have changed, he said: "They decided there was a greater good and we weren't part of the greater good."

The plans sound great: larger bath houses, improved parking, rinsing stations, shaded pavilions and more.

The surf sailors know they have a problem. This is, after all, the Golden Isles and they're a little on the scruffy side, a little too gritty. They don't even have a sign explaining who they are and that they're open to anyone if there's room.

One of the avid sailboarders, retired English physician Malcolm Wright, says it's untrue that the facilities aren't open to the public. He acknowledges the gates are locked at times, but what isn't?

"We have a gate to prevent pilfering," and surf boards and other equipment have gone missing in the past, he said.

Try to get into any public building at night. Most are locked down at day's end as is the publicly-owned lighthouse, where the Historical Society charges a fee to climb it. One imagines there will be a fee for the museum. One of the few county buildings you can get into past 5 p.m. is the county jail. There is no admission charge, but it can cost a lot to leave.

Jones said there will be "a sailing amenity" for anyone who wants it. She says rentals would still be available, but a club member said the rental would be prohibitive except for those who can shell out more than \$100 an hour. That's prohibitive to all but the wealthy. It would end surf sailing on St. Simons Island, Wright said.

He has taught a number of youngsters to windsurf with gear he loans them.

"I teach them, and I keep an eye on them. I lend them stuff, and to adults, too," he said.

The committee members aren't considering the trouble of hauling a sailboat to the beach on a trailer and then erecting a mast. Wright estimates it takes at least 1 1/2 hours to rig a boat once the mast is lowered and as much to take it down. The ability to leave the masts up is what makes the club attractive. You wonder if the committee really wants a sailor taking up several parking spaces with a vehicle and trailer.

To her credit, Jones had an uphill battle establishing the museum at a cost of \$3.2 million. Once it was done, you would think she could rest easy, but that wasn't the case.

"I started lying awake at night thinking, 'Oh my gosh. That museum is going to be operating in a dust bowl,'" she said.

Not totally. It has paved parking immediately in front that serves the museum, but the big beach parking lot is where the drifting dust clouds are raised.

So improving the parking lot has turned into something larger that she says will be good for the community. After all, she asserts, the market value of that piece of property where the boatyard sits is enormous.

Actually, its market value should not be a consideration at all. It belongs to the public, as does the old Coast Guard station.

For the time being, the lanyards clang against the top of the Hobie Cats' masts. It's music to many ears, a nuisance to others.

Meanwhile, many island residents — meaning those who don't pay hotel bed taxes — are siding with the sailing club. In fact, a petition on change.org to preserve the boat yard got 1,500 signers in three days.

It's interesting that the county wants to improve this small block of land while it preserves 30 adjoining acres of beachfront as little more than a breeding ground for mosquitoes and for beach access that is convenient only for nearby homeowners. That could be the next battleground.

During another bureaucratic battle over a popular boat landing, an island native asked, "Can't anything on this island stay the same?"

Foolish man. Of course not.

Terry Dickson has been a journalist in South Carolina and the Golden Isles for more than 40 years. He is a Glynn County resident. Contact him at terrydickson50@gmail.com.

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State lawmakers mull paper ballot voting

By **BEN NADLER**
Associated Press

ATLANTA — As Georgia lawmakers consider scrapping electronic voting machines for a system that uses paper ballots, a razor-thin margin in a U.S. House race over 500 miles away in Western Pennsylvania has highlighted a crucial distinction between the two systems: the presence of an auditable paper trail.

The proposal would move Georgia from its 16-year-old electronic touchscreen voting system with no paper backup, to either a touchscreen system that prints a paper ballot or paper ballots marked by

pencil.

Republican Rep. Ed Setzler of Acworth, one of the bill's primary backers, said it was needed to ensure that election results could be audited if there were claims or evidence of irregularities and to bolster voter confidence.

The measure recently passed the House Governmental Affairs Committee and is expected to quickly see a vote before the full House.

"I think the public recognizes that the best-in-class technology for voting is a combination of technology with paper so that you have a verifiable, recount-able, physically tally-able ballot

at the end of the process that if there is any lack of confidence in the machine you can do a physical manual tally recount," Setzler said.

A tight U.S. House race in Western Pennsylvania last week was questioned by GOP officials there who said they were looking into alleged voting irregularities after Democrat Conor Lamb declared victory over Republican Rick Saccone in a longtime GOP stronghold that includes four counties in the Pittsburgh area.

That Pennsylvania district and Georgia both use voting systems that lack a clear record of voter intent, making

it difficult to audit or verify results, according to Marian Schneider, a former Pennsylvania election official and president of Verified Voting, a group that advocates for transparent elections.

"It's just like any other process. When you are trying to audit something, you have to have a record of the original transaction to check against reported results," Schneider said in a phone interview.

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