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SAPELO ISLAND DESCENDANTS OF SLAVES FILE DISCRIMINATION LAWSUIT

ATLANTA, GEORGIA – Fifty-seven Sapelo Island property owners and other residents and two community organizations – Help Org Inc. and Raccoon Hogg Community Development Corporation – today filed a federal race discrimination lawsuit against McIntosh County, the state of Georgia, and the Sapelo Island Heritage Authority (SIHA). The families are descendants of Gullah-Geechee slaves who lived on the Georgia barrier island as far back as the 18th century. The lawsuit alleges that the county, state, and SIHA are engaged in a policy designed to make plaintiffs’ lives so uncomfortable that they abandon their homes and their land.

“These actions are destroying the last intact Gullah-Geechee community in the country,” said Reed Colfax, the plaintiffs’ attorney and a partner in the civil rights law firm, Relman, Dane & Colfax, PLLC. “The county and state are depriving our clients of basic municipal services, limiting their access to their lands. In addition, the county tried to dramatically increase their taxes in an effort to force them off Sapelo Island, which their families have known as home for generations.”

The complaint, which was filed in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Georgia, documents discrimination by the county, state, and SIHA. For instance:

- Although the county provides comprehensive municipal services on the mainland, there are no water, sewer, police, fire or medical services, or a school, on Sapelo Island.
- In spite of this discrepancy, the county charges the Gullah-Geechee land owners similar or higher property taxes.
- The state claims ownership of 97 percent of Sapelo Island, leaving the Gullah Geechee confined to the only permanent residential area on the island – Hogg Hummock. The state’s ownership stake is based on a history of fraudulent transfers and land theft by white millionaires throughout the 20th century.
- The few services that the state does provide are inadequate. For instance, the state-operated ferry is the sole means to travel from the mainland to the island. The ferry is inaccessible to people with disabilities and has such a limited schedule that it is impossible to live on the island and hold a job on the mainland.
- The Sapelo Island Heritage Authority was created by the state to protect and promote the Gullah-Geechee culture, history, and traditions. In fact, the opposite has occurred. SIHA has favored the interests of developers and white vacationers over those of the longtime residents.

Plaintiffs seek adequate services, access to their ancestral lands, protection from tax increases, and monetary damages.

Sapelo Island

Sapelo Island is a 16,500-acre barrier island off the coast of Georgia, in McIntosh County. It is located northeast of Darien, approximately 70 miles south of Savannah. Residents of Sapelo Island are the largest community of Gullah Geechee in the country. The Gullah Geechee are descendants of peoples from various parts of West Africa, whose ancestors were brought as slaves to the southeastern coast of the United States. Gullah-Geechee communities once populated many parts of the coast ranging from southern North Carolina to northern Florida.

Like the islands of Hilton Head, South Carolina, and St. Simmons, Georgia, before it, Sapelo Island struggles against the pressures of development that threaten to convert the island from a community that has been home to the same families for nine generations into a vacation destination spot with luxury second homes and resorts.

High Taxes and Few Services

In 2012, the county raised property taxes on the island by as much as 1,000 percent for some parcels. County services benefitting the Gullah Geechee on the island did not appear with the tax hikes. Instead, the millions of property tax and state and federal grant dollars the county has spent for years on infrastructure and emergency services throughout the county, including monies specifically allocated for Sapelo Island, continued to be spent exclusively on the predominantly white mainland.

The county maintains a zoning code for the island that has the stated purpose of protecting the Gullah-Geechee population, the unique historic resources, and traditional patterns of development, from threat from land speculators and housing forms. In direct contradiction to that mandate, the county has allowed some 25 homes to be built by white developers or vacationers on the island. The homes are completely contrary to the traditional housing forms and many violate other explicit requirements of the zoning ordinance, including square footage maximums. Meanwhile, Gullah-Geechee descendants have had their efforts to build homes on their properties on the island thwarted by the county and state.

While the county receives significant grant funding from the state and federal governments for municipal projects in the county, and even receives monies earmarked for Sapelo Island, the county has not actually spent the vast majority of those funds on the island or otherwise in a manner that that benefits the Gullah-Geechee population.

The services provided by the state are inadequate. The water is discolored, smells, and is likely contaminated with PCBs. The dumpsite overflows with garbage; crawls with buzzards, animals, and vermin; and is impossible for the elderly population to use. The ferry to the island has a schedule that makes living on the island (where there are essentially no jobs) and working on the mainland impossible. The ferry is inaccessible for people with disabilities preventing or discouraging many elderly Sapelo descendants from living in, or visiting, their homes and properties. The limited emergency services available from the state are unreliable and inconsistent, which has contributed to deaths and other complications from injuries and illness on the island.

The Sapelo Island Heritage Authority, which was created by the state to maintain Hogg Hummock as a historic community occupied by the Gullah-Geechee descendants of Sapelo's

slaves, has engaged in and facilitated discrimination against the very people it is supposed to protect. SIHA has obtained land on the island through a process infected by fraud and illegitimacy, and has conducted land transactions that favor white land owners over Gullah-Geechee property owners.

About Relman, Dane & Colfax

A national civil rights firm based in Washington, D.C., Relman, Dane & Colfax represents victims of discrimination in innovative litigation involving housing, lending, employment and public accommodations. Among its more notable cases, the firm has: prevailed in a case against the City of Zanesville, Ohio, for its refusal to extend public water service to an African-American neighborhood; used the False Claims Act to enforce the obligation of Westchester County, New York, to take steps to counteract racial segregation; and brought two high-profile lawsuits against Wells Fargo for intentionally targeting minority communities with predatory mortgage loans.

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