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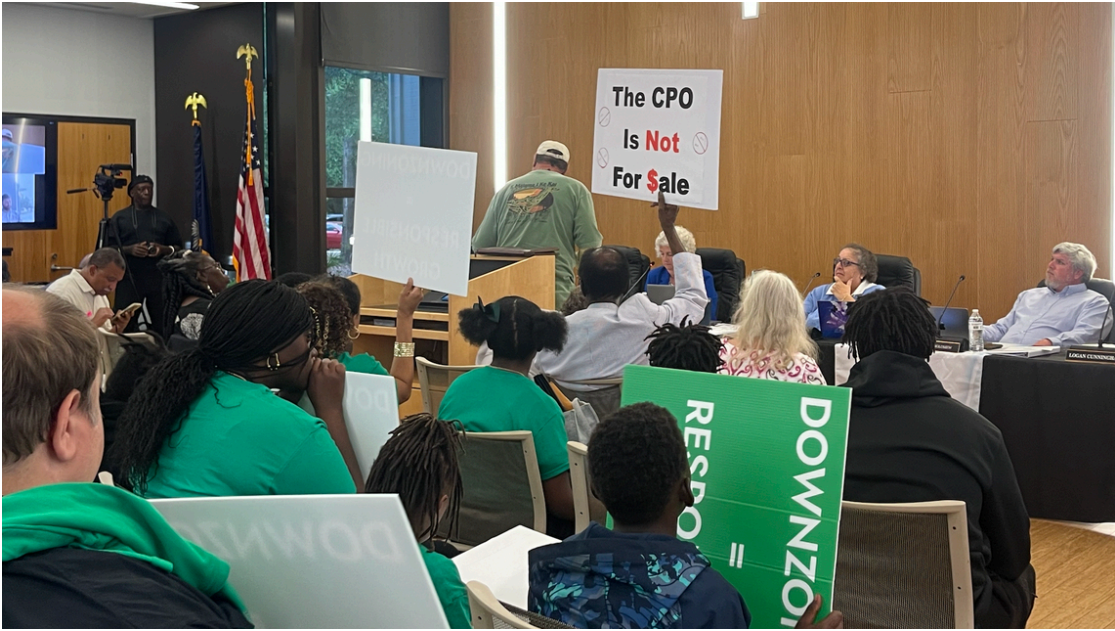


POLITICS & GOVERNMENT


Pine Island developer’s lawyers begin talks with Beaufort County on golf course

By **Chloe Appleby**



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Community members representing both sides of the Pine Island development debate filled the St. Helena library branch for a Beaufort County Council meeting on April 28, 2025. Chloe Appleby



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In a narrowly-decided vote, the Beaufort County Council agreed to start legal negotiations with the Pine Island plan developer. The decision does not mean the

county has accepted the developer's application, or that they will, but it does pave the way for legal deal-making between the two.



It also means that the possibility of developing an 18-hole golf course on 437 acres on the north shore of St. Helena Island — which is currently protected against such development by a zoning overlay — lives another day.

The 5-4 decision came after an hours-long, closed-door session on Wednesday, where council members received legal advice about the proposed development agreement. The county cited attorney-client privilege as their reasoning for keeping the discussion out of view from the dozens of community members crowding the room.

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Jessie White, the south coast office director with The Coastal Conservation League, said this “blatant lack of transparency” was discouraging. So was the fact that not all council members were present for the vote, she said.

Of those who voted in favor of negotiating was District 2 representative, David Bartholomew.

“I thought it would be irresponsible not to engage in negotiations to see if we could get something that would satisfy the community needs in that area,” said Bartholomew. “Ultimately it could still be a no, but I feel like we had to try to put a good faith effort in instead of just closing it out.”

He was joined by Tom Reitz, Logan Cunningham, Paula Brown and Tab Tabernik.

York Glover, who represents Pine Island, voted to not engage with the developer.


“How do you permit this to happen today and stop it from happening tomorrow? You can’t,” said Glover. He said that the council is setting a precedent that Gullah-owned land will be given out to “the highest bidder.”

“One of the things that is real is that if you lose the land, you lose the culture,” Glover said.

Council Chair Alice Howard, Larry McElynn and Gerald Dawson also voted in opposition. Mark Lawson and Joe Passiment were not present for the meeting.

The county hired John DuBose of Smith, Robinson, Holler, DuBose and Morgan, a Columbia-based law firm, to review and negotiate the development agreement application. DuBose also reviewed a second application with the county for a proposed development at Ramsey Farms near Burton at 98 Jennings Road. The council [decided unanimously on Monday](#) to enter into negotiations with that developer.

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What is a development agreement?

A development agreement is a legally-binding contract between a developer and a local government that sets out the terms for how a piece of land will be developed. It gives both sides certainty about the project while allowing them to negotiate specific conditions and requirements.

These agreements have been used sparingly in unincorporated Beaufort County. In recent memory, Beaufort County entered into a controversial [development agreement with landowner Robert Graves](#) in 2018 and amended that agreement in 2020 to build out Pepper Hall development on the Okatie River.

Kevin Dukes, a local real estate attorney representing the developer, said that development agreements are the “only way” that the public can engage in a development, through their elected officials.

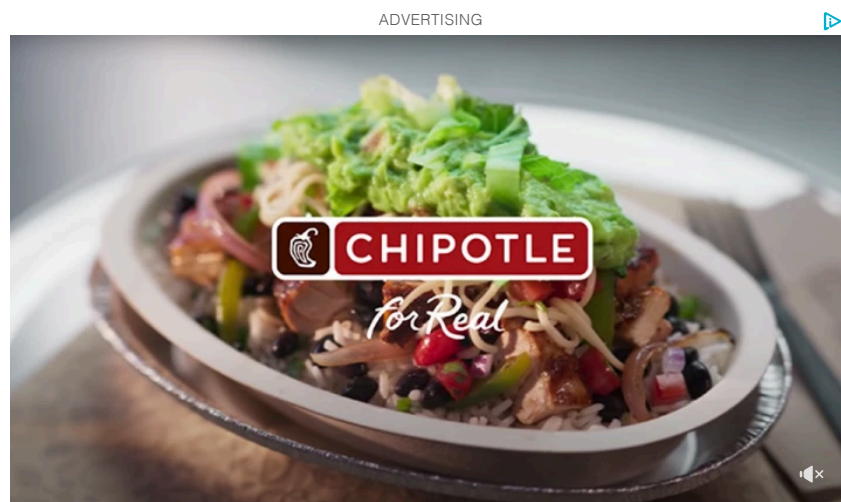
“By contrast, if you just have a developer who is going through the strict zoning code and building a project by right, there is no public hearing, there is no engagement, there is no back and forth,” Dukes said.

But White said that development agreements “more often than not” end in a result that is more favorable for the developer and benefits the public less than zoning and comprehensive plan policies.

The agreements do have time limits that are determined by the property’s acreage, according to [state law](#). In this case, the development agreement lasts for up to 10 years.

Zoning map amendments — a change that alters the designated land-use classification — and development agreements are separately-decided, but they often go hand-in-hand.

In the case of pine island, the developer is seeking both a zoning map amendment that removes the CPO from the property and approval of a development agreement that includes a golf course. Both actions require a vote from the county council.



How did we get here?

In 2022, Elvio Tropeano, who has served as the public face representing the owners of Pine Island, applied to remove the Pine Island property from St. Helena's Cultural Protection Overlay, a zoning amendment that prohibits the development of resorts, gated communities and golf courses in an effort to preserve Gullah culture. It has been in effect since the late 1990s.

He agreed to withdraw that request so that the county could look into changes that would allow some non-conforming development in specific situations, according to previous reporting by The Island Packet.

The county council instead responded by strengthening the CPO, further clarifying that golf courses are banned on St. Helena. He has since challenged the [legality of the CPO in court](#), and that case is still ongoing.

After a year of relative silence, the developer submitted a second application for a zoning map amendment in April. If approved, 437 acres of Pine Island property would be removed from the CPO.

On May 5, the county's Planning Commission [voted unanimously to recommend denial](#) of the amendment application. Commissioners were ultimately concerned that approving the amendment could set a precedent for future developments that could erode the cultural environmental protections in place. The Natural Resources Committee will make a final recommendation next month to the Beaufort County Council, the ultimate decision makers.

The developer publicized their [development agreement application](#), which would consist of 49 residential units and an 18-hole golf course upon removal of the property from the CPO.

The plan also includes providing land and \$2.5 million in funding for a community center on the island and pledges to preserve open space, some of which is the proposed golf course. Further, a foundation supported by property transfer fees will donate to local non-profits, according to the application.



White says that the golf course option largely mirrors the developer's original plan.

If the county denies the developer's application, the developer proposes a denser residential development of 149 homes with 90 docks. This is referred to as the "full density plan" and can be developed as a matter of right, meaning they would not need to change the current zoning to pursue that option.

This version of the plan would not include a community center, open space preservation nor a community foundation. Documents from the developer also claim that it would also create a "domino effect" by encouraging other large-scale development on the island.

What happens next?

The zoning map amendment will go before the county's Natural Resource Committee. Their recommendation will be made to the full county council, who has the ultimate say whether it will pass.

Local code requires that there be two public hearings on development agreements. The council decided that those hearings will take place on September 22 and October 27. They will be open to the public. Sometimes, there are changes between the first and second reading once there has been public input.

There are many possible outcomes of the negotiations — legal counsels representing the developer will be talking back and forth for the next several weeks — but the decision ultimately comes down to a vote from the council members sitting on the dais.

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Chloe Appleby is a general assignment reporter for The Island Packet and The Beaufort Gazette. A North Carolina native, she has spent time reporting on higher education in the Southeast. She has a bachelor's degree in English from Davidson College and a master's degree in journalism from Columbia University.

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Sadly at times local government is saddled with development agreements that were made 20+ years ago and still in place today by councils that didn't have the proper vision for the future . This situation is different and hopefully a much wiser governing body. St. Helana is a unique place and has a history from prior of revolutionary war we must preserve . When the developer uses veiled threats of "give me what I really want or I'll flood the ground with more homes " says to me that they are focused on profit only.

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