

Senate Resolution 727

By: Senators James of the 35th, Jackson of the 2nd, Ramsey, Sr. of the 43rd, Jones of the 10th, Harbison of the 15th and others

A RESOLUTION

1 Creating the Senate Preservation of Sapelo Island Study Committee; and for other purposes.

2 WHEREAS, Greater Sapelo Island of McIntosh County, Georgia, is this state's fourth largest
3 barrier island and the home of important endangered wildlife, treasured historical structures,
4 and the vanishing culture of a significant community consisting of the Geechee Gullah
5 people; and

6 WHEREAS, approximately 97 percent of Sapelo Island is owned by the State of Georgia and
7 is managed by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, while the remaining 3 percent
8 of the island is under private ownership; and

9 WHEREAS, the island also consists of the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research
10 Reserve, the University of Georgia Marine Institute, and the Reynold's Mansion State Park;
11 and

12 WHEREAS, the Geechee Gullah people are the direct descendants of the slaves of Thomas
13 Spalding who was the original landowner of Sapelo Island, and following the conclusion of
14 the Civil War, ownership of designated lands of the island were legally transferred to these
15 original freed men; and

16 WHEREAS, in 1983, Georgia law established the Sapelo Island Heritage Authority for the
17 purpose of preserving the culture in the endangered historical areas of Sapelo Island; and

18 WHEREAS, a severe erosion of Geechee Gullah culture and heritage has continued to the
19 point that it is in a state of near extinction; and

20 WHEREAS, extensive, unregulated commercial development of the island, without ethical
21 review or oversight, threatens not only the Geechee Gullah people but also the island's
22 beautiful natural resources and wildlife; and

23 WHEREAS, such development has been for the personal, private gain of the few at the
24 expense of all of Georgia's citizens; and

25 WHEREAS, title to lands of the island is a matter of legal dispute, and the state's current
26 ownership may be the result of unjust enrichment at the expense of the Geechee Gullah
27 people; and

28 WHEREAS, the island has an abundance of historical property that is in need of state
29 funding for renovation and promotion as tourist attractions; and

30 WHEREAS, much of the island is composed of natural areas which need to be protected as
31 habitats for wildlife, nesting birds, and turtles in order to protect the beauty and tranquility
32 of this special state resource; and

33 WHEREAS, many concerned citizens, environmentalist groups, business and property
34 owners, and the original Geechee Gullah residents are gravely concerned about the future of
35 this beautiful island and the survival of its native people; and

36 WHEREAS, before it is too late and the important environmental and historical heritage of
37 the island is lost forever, the State of Georgia needs to immediately undertake an extensive
38 study and proposal development regarding the funding, governance, and future of Sapelo
39 Island.

40 NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE that there is created the Senate
41 Preservation of Sapelo Island Study Committee to be composed of seven members of the
42 Senate to be appointed by the President of the Senate. The President of the Senate shall
43 designate one of the members to serve as chairperson of the committee. The committee shall
44 meet at the call of the chairperson.

45 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the committee shall undertake a study of the conditions,
46 needs, issues, and problems mentioned above or related thereto and recommend any actions
47 or legislation which the committee deems necessary or appropriate. The committee shall
48 review the following matters in particular:

- 49 (1) Building codes and zoning codes that may be needed for the protection of the
50 environment and the historical heritage of the island;
- 51 (2) The need for ethical oversight, ethical statutory provisions, and conflict of interest
52 restrictions relating to the governing and development of the island;

- 53 (3) The need for greater input or control in the public policy and governance of the island
54 by the residents;
- 55 (4) The fairness and equality of property tax evaluations and assessments; and
- 56 (5) Access by and fair representation of the Geechee Gullah people in government public
57 policy effecting the island.

58 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the committee may conduct such meetings at such
59 places and at such times as it may deem necessary or convenient to enable it to exercise fully
60 and effectively its powers, perform its duties, and accomplish the objectives and purposes
61 of this resolution. The members of the committee shall receive the allowances authorized
62 for legislative members of interim legislative committees but shall receive the same for not
63 more than five days unless additional days are authorized. The funds necessary to carry out
64 the provisions of this resolution shall come from the funds appropriated to the Senate. In the
65 event the committee makes a report of its findings and recommendations, with suggestions
66 for proposed legislation, if any, such report shall be made on or before December 31, 2012.
67 The committee shall stand abolished on December 31, 2012.