

House Resolution 551

By: Representatives Dawkins-Haigler of the 91st, Williams of the 168th, Brooks of the 55th, Stephens of the 165th, Gordon of the 163rd, and others

A RESOLUTION

1 Creating the House Study Committee on the Preservation of Sapelo Island; and for other
2 purposes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

41 NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES that
42 there is created the House Study Committee on the Preservation of Sapelo Island to be
43 composed of seven members of the House of Representatives to be appointed by the Speaker
44 of the House of Representatives. The Speaker of the House of Representatives shall
45 designate one of the seven members to serve as chairperson of the committee. The
46 committee shall meet at the call of the chairperson.

47 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the committee shall undertake a study of the conditions,
48 needs, issues, and problems mentioned above or related thereto and recommend any actions

49 or legislation which the committee deems necessary or appropriate. The committee shall
50 review the following matters in particular:

- 51 (1) Building codes and zoning codes that may be needed for the protection of the
52 environment and the historical heritage of the island;
- 53 (2) The need for ethical oversight, ethical statutory provisions, and conflict of interest
54 restrictions relating to the governing and development of the island;
- 55 (3) The need for greater input or control in the public policy and governance of the island
56 by the residents;
- 57 (4) The fairness and equality of property tax evaluations and assessments; and
- 58 (5) Access by and fair representation of the Geechee Gullah people in government public
59 policy effecting the island.

60 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the committee may conduct such meetings at such
61 places and at such times as it may deem necessary or convenient to enable it to exercise fully
62 and effectively its powers, perform its duties, and accomplish the objectives and purposes
63 of this resolution. The legislative members of the committee shall receive the allowances
64 authorized for legislative members of interim legislative committees but shall receive the
65 same for not more than five days unless additional days are authorized. The funds necessary
66 to carry out the provisions of this resolution shall come from the funds appropriated to the
67 House of Representatives. In the event the committee makes a report of its findings and
68 recommendations, with suggestions for proposed legislation, if any, such report shall be
69 made on or before December 31, 2013. The committee shall stand abolished on December
70 31, 2013.