

Envisioning The Future of St. George Island

Question & Answer Forum
Question Catalog

March 31, 2021

FINAL DRAFT



Report prepared for the St. George Island Citizens Working Group by the Florida State University Department of Urban and Regional Planning 2021 Spring Studio Capstone Team



Executive Summary

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St. George Island is an unincorporated barrier island community on Florida's Gulf Coast. As an unincorporated entity, the Island resides under the jurisdiction of Franklin County, which includes all planning, zoning, land-use, and service provisions. Prior to the 1956 construction of the Bryant Patton Memorial Bridge, the Island had seen little development. However, once the connection between the Island and the mainland was established, a rise in development quickly followed. Over time, this has led to the Island's current status as a vacation destination, which has only increased pressures on growth and development and service provision on this small Island. Such pressures have resulted in increased unplanned development across the Island, specifically in the commercial district. Community residents have begun questioning the efficacy of government service provision and future development planning as growth pressures and demands of services increasingly multiply. This led a local citizen group to consider alternative options for governance, namely, municipal incorporation, to increase self-autonomy and increased decision-making for Island residents.

This report documents the third and final community workshop of the series held on March 31, and serves to detail the following:

- A comprehensive question catalog of the March 31 community question and answer forum
- This catalog is a record of the questions submitted prior to the meeting and those raised during

During late 2020, the St. George Island (SGI) Citizens Working Group began exploring options of alternative governance in order to gain increased decision-making power regarding future development and improved local service delivery. In their research, municipal incorporation was identified as offering the most benefits for the Island. The St. George Island Citizens Working Group then contracted the Florida State University Mark and Marianne Barnebey Planning and Development Lab (BPDFL) to design, facilitate, and host a series of three community workshops. The previous two community visioning sessions encouraged public participation and discussions on interests and concerns regarding the current status of SGI governance and potential solutions. This report documents the third in the series conducted on March 31, 2021.

The workshop served as an open forum question and answer session to further inform community stakeholders on the elements of incorporation, and what this could look like for SGI. The session was held during the morning and evening, using a large group forum in which SGI Citizens Working Group members sat as a panel to answer community residents' questions.

The open question and answer forum consists of five sections which is documented in its entirety in Appendix A and B including:

- Town budget
- Town charter and government structure
- Zoning and interactions with Board of County Commissioners
- Infrastructure and service provision (Ie: road maintenance, flood control, commercial district)
- Miscellaneous (Ie: HOA, residency concerns, history of incorporation in SGI)

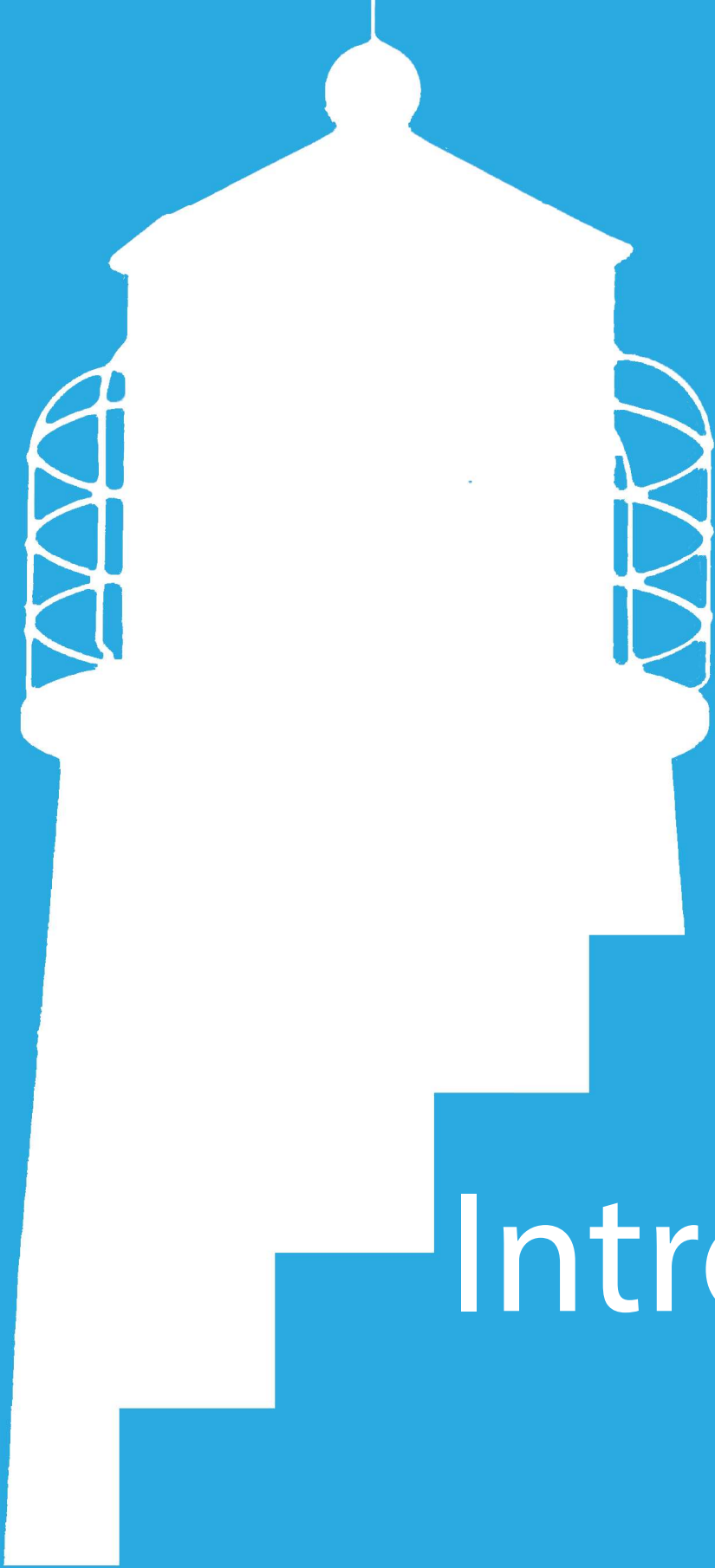
Each section allowed meeting participants to ask questions, which were addressed by SGI Citizens Working Group members. To conclude each section, time was designated for public comment regarding previously asked questions and answers.

Table of Contents

1) Introduction	6
2) Meeting Process	9
3) Meeting Turnout	11
Appendices	15
Appendix 1: March 10 and March 31 Pre-Meeting Participants' Questions	16
Appendix 2: March 31 Primary Workshop Discussions	20
Appendix 3: SGI Commercial District Land Use Zoning Map	23
Appendix 4: References	24

Figures

Figure 1.1 SGI Location Map	7
Figure 1.2 SGI Sunset	8
Figure 2.1 SGI Lighthouse	10
Figure 3.1 SGI Coastal View	12
Figure 3.2 SGI Zoom Meeting Capture	12



Introduction

1

Introduction

St. George Island (SGI) is a barrier island spanning 28-miles east to west along Florida's Gulf Coast, as part of incorporated Franklin County, FL. The Island is an unincorporated community, meaning all jurisdictional authority is governed by Franklin County. This level of governance includes but is not limited to planning, zoning, land-use, and service provision. The Island is connected to the mainland by the Bryant Patton Memorial Bridge, which has played a key role in the increase in development and popularity as a vacation destination over the last two decades. This increase in development has led to a rise of intensified growth pressures and demands of services.

As a result of multiplying growth and development pressures, the SGI Citizens Working Group, a locally formed organization, began the process of exploring alternative options for governance in early 2020. An alternative form of governance would allow the SGI community to potentially achieve an increased level of decision-making for future planned development and the provision of services. In coordination with the Florida State University (FSU) Department of Urban and Regional Planning, the SGI Citizens Working Group established a plan to conduct a three part series of community workshops. The community workshops were intended to increase public participation in the educational, consensus building, and decision-making processes of exploring possible alternative forms of governance.

The previous two meetings (February 10 and March 10) cultivated a dialog on what residents value about SGI currently and areas in need of improvement, what forms of governance are available, and which would comprehensively address the majority of residents' concerns. Municipal incorporation was identified as the form of governance that would address the majority of concerns regarding growth and development pressure (i.e.: zoning and land-use decision-making and service provision).

This report serves to document the third workshop of the series, an open question and answer forum facilitated by a panel of SGI Citizens Working Group members. The aim of the meeting was to address meeting participants' questions and concerns to reach a more informed state regarding municipal incorporation.

This report contains four sections including this introduction, which are summarized below.

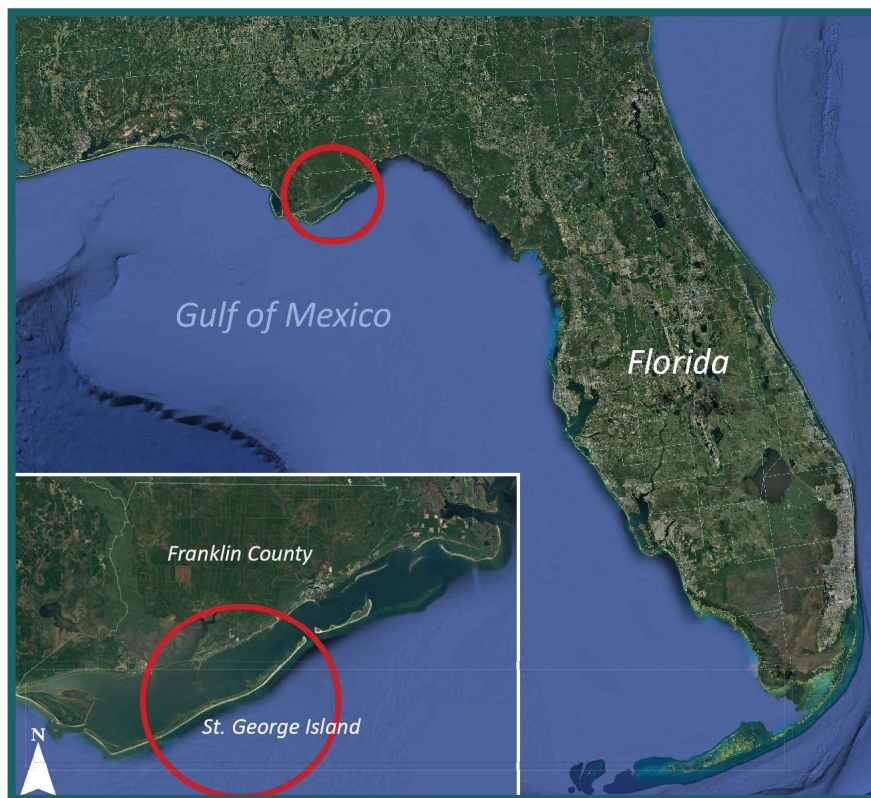


Figure 1.1 SGI Location Map

Meeting Process

Preparation for this meeting was largely comprised of agenda setting in order to effectively address the SGI community's questions. This section will detail the steps taken by the FSU Studio Team and SGI Citizens Working Group, to ensure meeting participants would have the chance to inform themselves on the process of municipal incorporation, as well as express concerns regarding such.

Meeting Turnout

This section of the report details the overall feel of the March 31 open forum discussions. While participation was lower, the meetings resulted in fruitful discussions nonetheless. The SGI Citizens Working Group addressed meeting participants' questions and concerns from the previous March 10 community workshop and those posed during the present meeting.

Appendices

This report includes four supporting appendices. The appendices include questions gathered from the March 10 community workshop and the March 31 pre-meeting survey, primary topics of discussion during the March 31 meeting, and map of the SGI commercial district as discussed during the March 31 meeting.

1. **March 10 & March 31 Meeting Participants' Questions**
2. **March 31 Workshop Primary Topics of Discussion**
3. **SGI Commercial District Land Use and Zoning Map**
4. **References**

These appendices serve as a detailed record of community residents' questions and concerns regarding municipal incorporation for St. George Island.

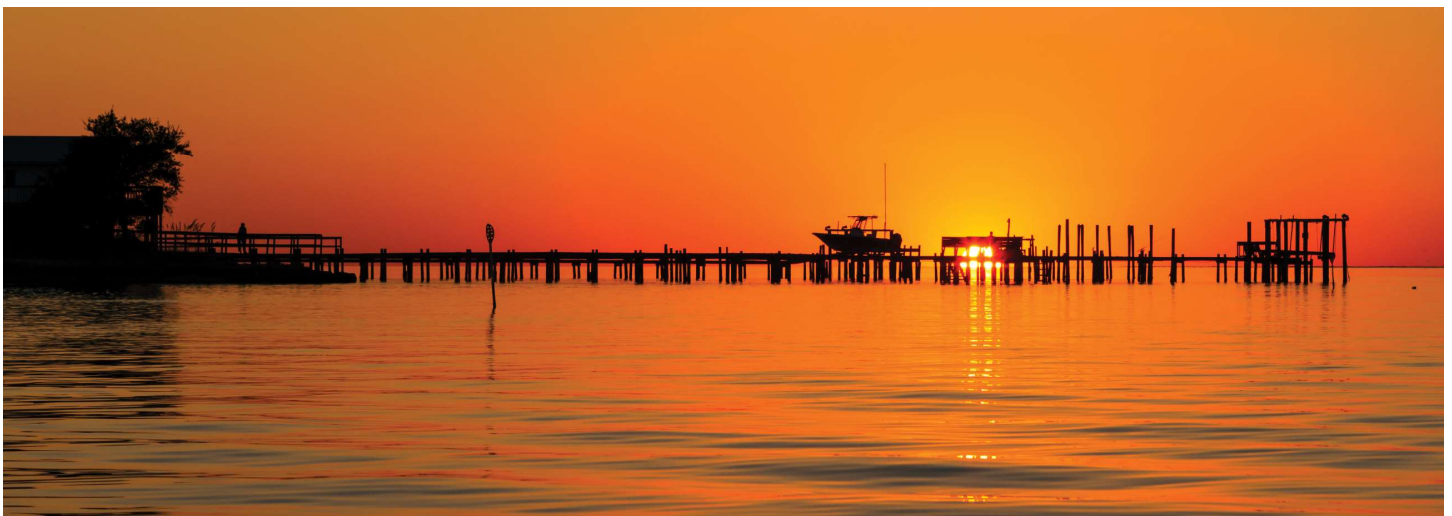
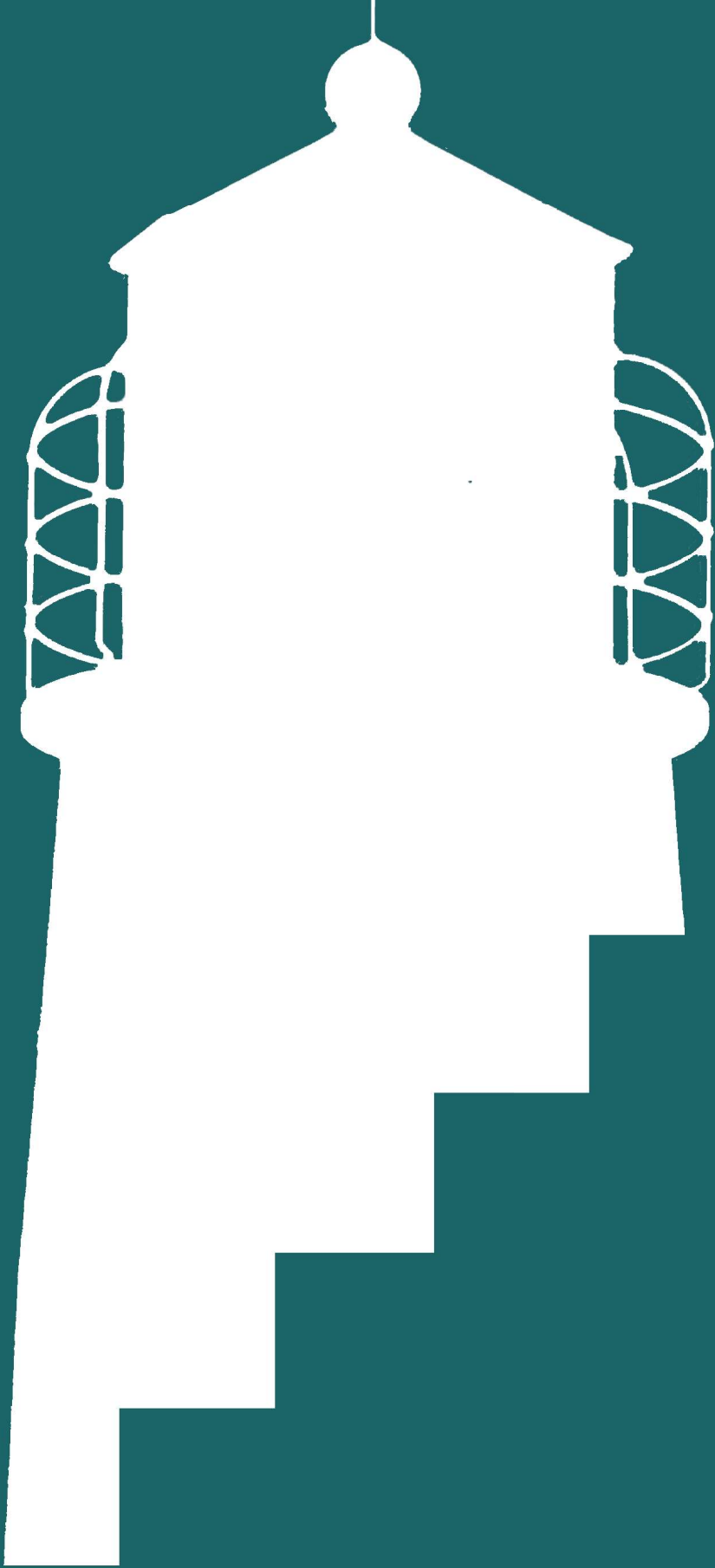


Figure 1.2 SGI Sunset (Shutterstock, 2021)



Meeting Process

2

Meeting Process

To prepare for the third community visioning session (March 31), the Studio Team completed a series of steps, including the following:

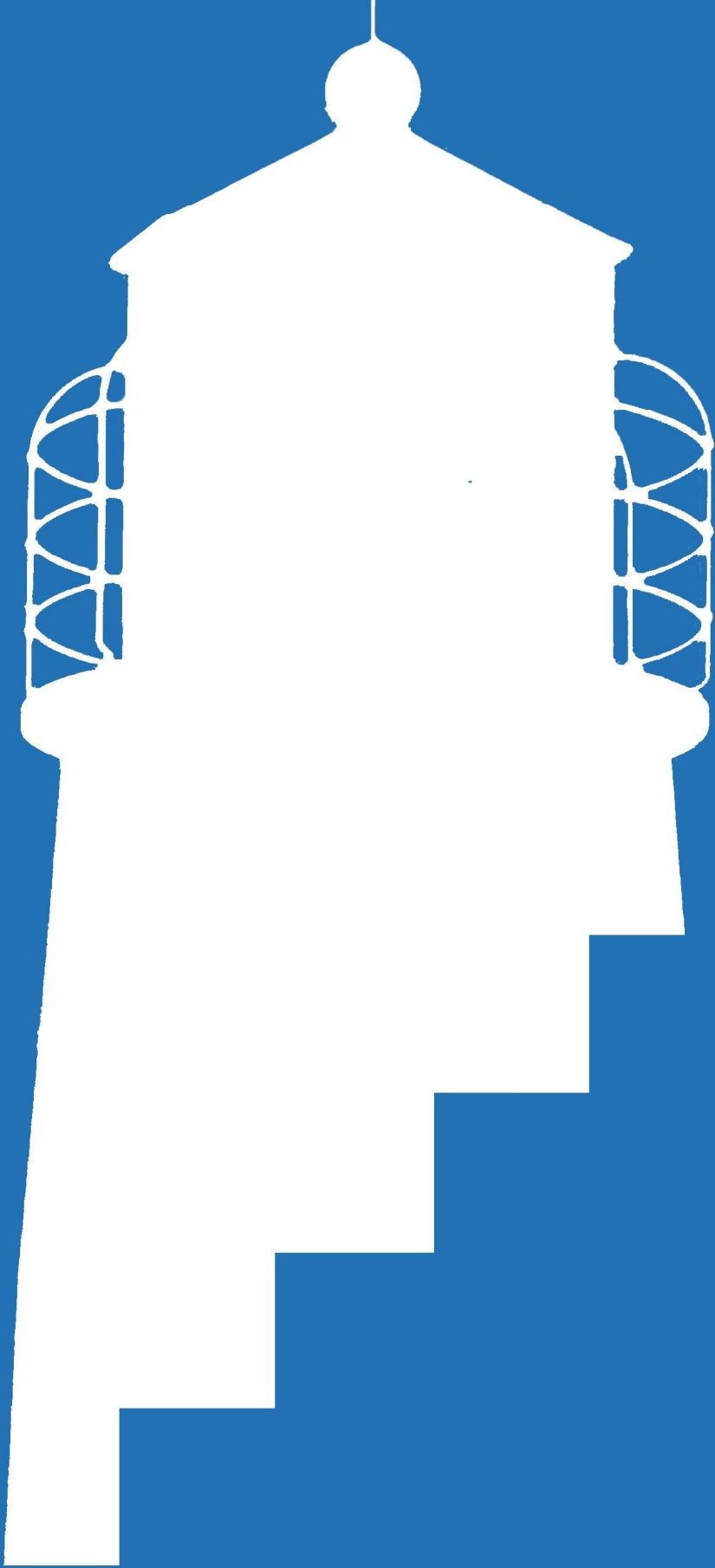
- Discussing expectations for the meeting with the SGI Citizens Working Group
- Drafting an agenda for the meeting
- Establishing the ground rules and guidelines for the meeting
- Distributing a pre-registration survey to gauge the number of participants that would attend, in addition to asking questions or providing comments
- Sorting the questions from the March 10 meeting and pre-registration survey into categories (i.e. budget, town government, zoning and Board of County Commissioner interactions, infrastructure and improvements, and miscellaneous)
- Ensure that the technology is adequate and fully functioning to host the meeting



Figure 2.1 SGI Lighthouse (Shutterstock, 2021)

The process that the Studio Team underwent was designed to ensure that the meeting ran smoothly and according to schedule, as per the client's request. The first three steps of the process allowed the Studio Team to understand the client's expectations for the meeting, and how the meeting should be structured. Included in the ground rules was a request to adhere to strict time frames throughout the agenda, so that the speakers could present their topics for five minutes and meeting participants could ask questions for the following 10 minutes.

Distributing a pre-registration survey allowed the Studio Team to keep track of the number of individuals that would attend the meeting, and the questions submitted for discussion during the meeting. Based on the survey responses, the Studio Team and the client were able to field the incoming questions and sort them into categories based on their overarching themes. These questions also included those that were gathered from the breakout sessions during the March 10 meeting. The final step in the process involved ensuring that the Zoom technology was set up and tested beforehand, so that no issues would take place during the meeting.



Meeting Turnout

3

Meeting Turnout

The March 31, 2021 meeting had a decent turnout, it was expected that the meeting would be much smaller considering that many people have expressed that they made up their mind on the subject of incorporation. The meeting was attended by approximately 35 community members excluding members of the St. George Island Citizens Working Group between the morning and evening sessions of the meeting.



Figure 3.1 SGI Coastal View (Shutterstock, 2021)

Throughout the meeting there was significantly less contention compared to the previous two. The discussion in the morning was largely dominated by two community members, while others were more active in the chat box. Most of the questions presented were expressed through the chat box. The conversation during both of the sessions was very amicable throughout the discussion. However, there were two community members that were acting as instigators in the chat. It is important to note that these community members decided to remain anonymous. This is something to take into account when hosting virtual meetings as the anonymity may be conducive to incendiary comments. Some of the concerns that arose were how to keep the small town feeling and how to ensure that non-voting registered property owners can still be a part of the conversation of incorporation.

This Question Catalog represents the culmination of the visioning sessions, and the end of the FSU Studio Team's involvement with the client, the SGI Citizens Working Group. The SGI Citizens Working Group will continue engaging with community residents to determine which form of governance best suits the Island, and if incorporation is selected, the client will be equipped with the necessary tools to complete the legislative process for incorporation.

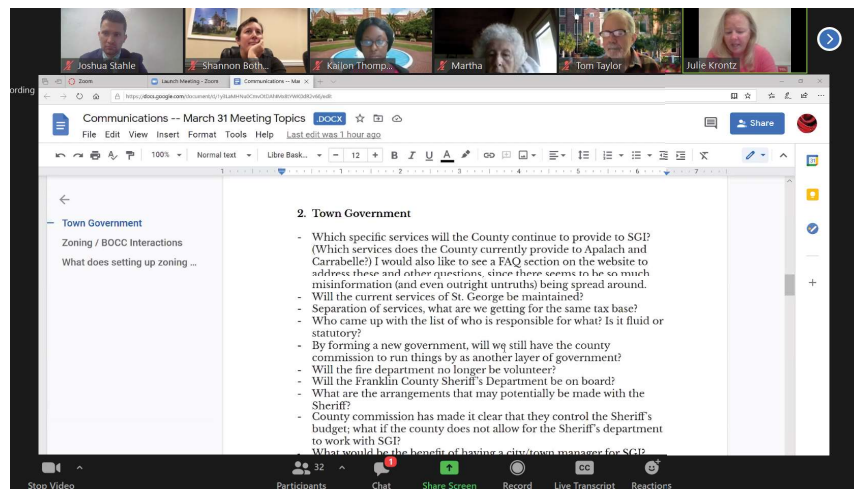
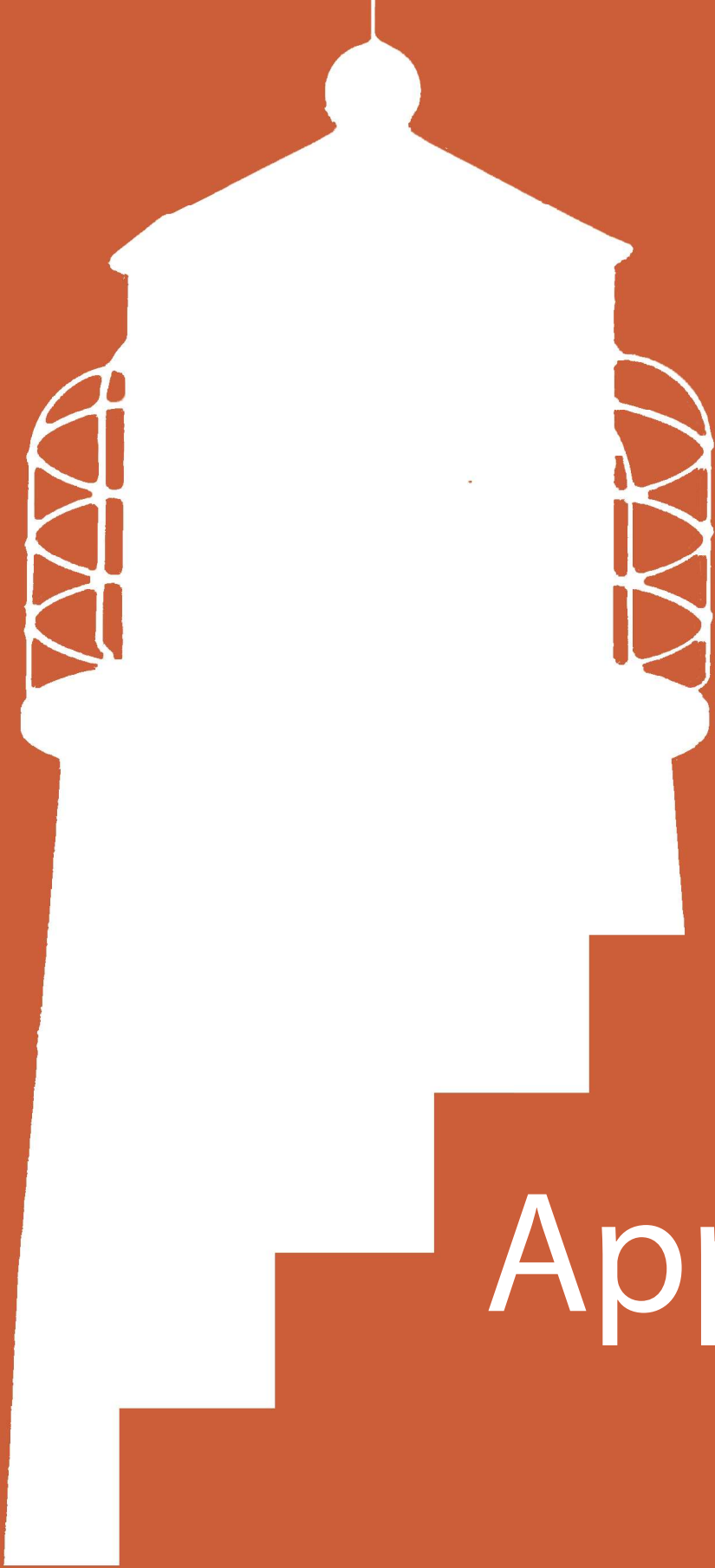


Figure 3.2 Zoom Meeting Capture



Appendices

Appendix 1

March 10 and March 31 Pre-Meeting Participants' Questions

These questions were gathered from the March 10 meeting and March 31 pre-meeting survey. They were on screen for the majority of the third meeting to guide the conversation and were broken into five thematic sections. Not each question was addressed specifically, but the general themes of the questions in each section were presented by a member of the SGI Citizens Working Group.

Budget

- How can we leverage this partnership with the County to get what we want out of the incorporation (zoning control, etc.) without taking on too much infrastructure?
- People nationwide are concerned about the growth in the number of government employees, can this be discussed during this forum?
- Is the proposed Annual Town Tax on top of the property tax we already pay?
- If we go with incorporation, the way the budget is laid out, taxes remain the same. Would the Town tax revenue actually support the same level of services that Franklin County provides now?
- How much of this new revenue will we end up spending trying to make up for the deficit of switching to incorporation?
- Budget currently looks realistic, but won't know for sure until the community is already incorporated and new costs may arise after the decision has been made. What kinds of projects could be included?
- I am concerned that Franklin County is very dependent on our taxes for support. Will we hurt the County by taking money away?
- Additional tax burden, improvement in services, any detrimental effect on the remainder of Franklin County?
- Will there be a reduction in county tax?
- With the 3 million as an additional tax, what happens to the County tax residents already pay? Will the County commission decide to divert tax dollars to other projects off SGI?
- How set in stone is the 3 mill tax?
- Will the millage rate go up or down in the future?
- Are their caps on millage rates over time or is that up to the discretion of the town council?
- How about a combo of funding sources rather than property tax?
- In the budget, there is an income item "permits." Would those permits also need to be obtained from the County as well?
- How much should commissioners be paid?
- When you say, "increase law enforcement" does that mean, SGI will have its own police force?
- What is the plan for law enforcement? Is a stand-alone Police Department a goal for SGI?
- Is it possible to operate a road department on \$500,000-\$800,000 per year?
- Will any roads/streets on SGI remain under County / State maintenance, and if so, which?
- Which roads in SGI are county roads? Which ones would the Town and county or state be responsible for?
- Can we put a tourist booth when people come on the Island or pay parking, it could be a few dollars. This could be done by apps.

Appendix 1

Town Government

- Which specific services will the County continue to provide to SGI? (Which services does the County currently provide to Apalach and Carrabelle?) I would also like to see a FAQ section on the website to address these and other questions, since there seems to be so much misinformation (and even outright untruths) being spread around.
- Will the current services of St. George be maintained?
- Separation of services, what are we getting for the same tax base?
- Who came up with the list of who is responsible for what? Is it fluid or statutory?
- By forming a new government, will we still have the County commission to run things by as another layer of government?
- Will the fire department no longer be volunteer?
- Will the Franklin County Sheriff's Department be on board?
- What are the arrangements that may potentially be made with the Sheriff?
- County commission has made it clear that they control the Sheriff's budget; what if the County does not allow for the Sheriff's department to work with SGI?
- What would be the benefit of having a town/town manager for SGI?
- Why do we have 5 Commissioners, a Mayor, Vice Mayor and a Town Manager?
- What is the current set up for Apalachicola and Carrabelle and how will SGI mimic or differ in town government?
- How can we avoid corruption on the town council?
- What are the criteria for serving on the town council?
- What controls do we have other than voting for who will be on Town Council?
- How much control will citizens have?
- Once we vote council members in, will they have full control or will voters still have a say in decisions?
- Extent of control over Town Councilors?
- How frequently are council members elected?
- Do council members have to live on the Island? Does that include the Town manager?
- Can we get qualified residents to participate in the council? Council should not be limited to people in positions of power (judges, etc)
- Electing leadership locally, for a township, will have the same issues that we currently have with county commissioners. I would speculate they would not listen to their constituents and vote as their own personal bias... How will you mitigate this from happening?
- Could the Town have more control if incorporated?
- Would the County Commissioners need to approve incorporation?
- Would SGI be taking over all zoning issues, building permits, inspections? And would this only be in control of the business district or the whole island?

Appendix 1

Zoning/BOCC

- What does setting up zoning control without incorporation look like?
- If SGI were to become a town, what would be the status of the original zoning? If the Town is required to accept existing zoning, how would the Town be able to make changes that the County is legally unable to do?
- How will the prior lawsuits regarding business district zoning affect the ability of the Town to enforce zoning and prevent spot zoning?
- Regarding zoning issues, the County was sued and lost, which is why they allow residential in the business district. Wouldn't the Town be subject to the same ruling as the County? Who is going to pay if a lawsuit results again?
- Are there county regulations about water run off/ sewer disposal, and other environmental issues that put a limit on the number of residences, buildings, or businesses that may be added to the downtown area?
- How likely is it that developers would be able to afford the complex sewer systems and water run off issues?
- Could dense housing occur within the small amount of space when considering the infrastructure?
- What would be the effect of a zoning change on existing businesses and homeowners?
- Can we reverse any bad decisions being made by the County regarding zoning and buildings?
- What obstacles exist for new businesses on the Island, and could the Town address those?
- Has anyone reached out to the SGI Civic Club who is already seeking grant money to improve the business district? Is it possible to just work together in this effort rather than incorporating?
- Will the Town hire professional planners to come up with a comprehensive zoning scheme for the commercial district?
- Will incorporation turn the Island into a larger version of the Plantation?
- Are there other alternatives to incorporation to force the County to allocate taxes to SGI?
- What can be done to get the County to be more responsive to SGI?

Infrastructure

- What infrastructure would the County / state continue to maintain after incorporation?
- How would the Town decide what improvements to make?
- Will the Town pave all the roads?
- Will the boat ramp be fixed?
- Can we get added police protection and beach warnings?
- Will ownership of the public beach (East 11th to West 12th) and its access points transfer to the Town? What about the boat ramp and other County facilities. Please list specifics.
- If we assume more control over parks and rec, who is responsible to do the work?
- Will we have to build new departments in the future?
- Who decides the priority of a project?

Appendices

Appendix 1

- Are we going to add beach patrols? If so, I assume only on county beaches correct?
- Are you going to provide municipal services such as garbage collection?

Miscellaneous

- Only registered voters in SGI are allowed to vote on this. Many, if not the majority of homeowners like myself live out of town. How are we going to benefit and participate as non-resident homeowners?
- Process and vote would be restricted to full-time residents; what extent do investment properties have a say in this process?
- Can you clarify the projected # of FT residents because there are a number that claim residency simply by being here 1/2 year?
- Why not form a special district instead of incorporating as a municipality?
- Is there anything in the middle between status quo and incorporation?
- What are the options for community if incorporation does not work out or is not what is wanted?
- Will there be a Referendum and what would that cost?
- Another SGI group looked at this a few years ago and decided not to proceed. Why?
- How would HOAs be impacted by incorporation? How will the incorporation help an owner inside an HOA?
- How will incorporation affect the plantation? That needs to be addressed due to the number of residents there.
- How does the Plantation deal into this?
- How incorporation will impact The Plantation?
- Will the maintenance of the Plantation remain the responsibility of the Plantation or will that fall under the Town?
- What happens to the state park if the municipality is formed?
- How will incorporation affect our volunteer organizations?

Appendix 2

March 31 Primary Workshop Discussions

These were the primary topics discussed during the open floor portions of the March 31 meeting. They are broken up by the thematic sections as covered in the meeting. Questions displayed in bold are community members' questions, and the following bulleted sections are SGI Citizens Working Group members' responses.

Budget

Policing

Would contracting with the sheriff entail the Town paying additional fees to the sheriff over and above what the County pays the sheriff currently for policing SGI?

- The plan is for us to supplement the sheriff's patrol budget so that we could have more frequent patrols out here. Currently the Sheriff's Department has two officers and one supervisor. That's not very many people to patrol, a county that is physically quite large.

Roads

Will the City take it over Gulf Beach Dr. after incorporation?

- I wouldn't see the Town taking it over necessarily but it would be an option. You'd have to have it undesignated as a county road, the Town wanted to take it over.

Paving all town control roads or keeping dirt?

- I'm thinking about paving the north south streets. I think most people agree that our dirt roads, if we can keep them graded nicely, are very functional. But we clearly need a solution to those north south roads that are like one third crumbling pavement, one third dirt and one third puddle. That needs to be addressed. It would be up to the Town council to decide what direction they would want to go on that but the budget that we've proposed does not include paving all the roads on St George Island, that would be an incredibly ambitious project and probably counterproductive given what the drainage needs are.

Water System

Is there any accommodation in the budget at this point for improvements in the water system?

- Water is a big topic and you're exactly right that we're in a difficult situation because the water company is privately owned. If it weren't if the Town owned the water company we would obviously have the opportunity to make improvements to your point, those could be expensive. But when you have an asset like a water company, you also have access to appealing financing opportunities so you wouldn't necessarily have to have an you know upfront payment of the entire cost of the improvement you can finance that over time, but unless and until the Town becomes the owner of the water company, I don't see them being in the Town being involved in the in the water system.

Fire Department

What about fire department funding and or possibly having a part time paid department?

- So what we have in this sample budget is funding for the fire department that is basically what people pay now which is a flat rate like for each house it's \$95 a year, and all that would continue that same amount

Appendix 2

currently collected by the County would be collected by the Town but it would be the same number, I would go to the fire department we also included in the budget some additional money for equipment for training, just to supplement the fire department budget should be town council decide in the future to professionalize.

Taxing

Can we put a tax on short term rentals?

- Unfortunately, a new town like ours would not have the ability to tax short term rentals, that's reserved to the County. There are other options, like charging for visitor parking. The Town Council could decide on this for any town owned lot.

Transition from County to City control

Why and how would the County transfer control of public lands to the City?

- The public areas are not dedicated to the County they're dedicated to whatever governmental entity is in control of that locality. What happens in the ordinary course there of new corporations like within the first year or so of the Town coming into existence the County and the Town will do an intergovernmental agreement that really lays out okay the Town is it lays out what the Town is taking over and what timeline. The enabling legislation that creates a new town basically requires the County and so there has to be an agreement of what that timeline is and within those agreements.

Town Government

Input of Non-Residents

What ways can you think of to give SGI property owners who are not residents and not registered voters input into the decisions made about the Island?

- We absolutely do believe and feel that the non-resident property owners should have some input into the projects we determine, we understand that you can't vote, you can't be a Town Council member, but you can be on focus groups. You can make your needs known what needs to be done from a community perspective. We are going to have community meetings and are going to have focus groups. That's going to become a vital part of the incorporation effort and getting us going and maintaining it long term. So, you're valuable to the community and your input should be easier to get when we're focused just on the Island.

County Commission On Incorporation

Does the County Commission have to approve incorporation?

- No, they don't need to approve it. It needs to be approved by the State legislature, and it would need to be approved in a referendum of our voters, not Franklin County voters, the registered voters on St George Island.

Appendix 2

Zoning/BOCC

Land Use in the Business District

What makes you expect the land usage, you're projecting? (APPENDIX C)

- Currently, it's hard for a commercial business to develop on the Island. There's parking issues. There's septic issues. The county has made it very difficult. So right now the easiest thing to do is put a skinny mini on a 25 foot lot. So that's what we've been seeing and we haven't seen any real commercial building in a long time. It's the quickest cheapest way to make money is to put up a skinny mini right now.

Infrastructure

Paying For Big Projects

How would we fund big ticket infrastructure items like the boat ramp that will take years to build up a reserve? Is that something that the Town can borrow money for or is that a grant process?

- Grants are definitely out there. So either that's a determination that we will get to make before incorporation and there's a project like that that we will have to do to understand the priority of it and where we can go to get funds for that. We're a town so once we have a bit of an established track record. If we had a huge expenditure that we needed to make and felt we needed to do that immediately we would have access to the municipal bond market. We can issue municipal bonds, but I think what we've seen in other cities that seem to be you know successfully managing their capital program is, you set up a 10 year plan. And if you see that you know Project X is going to. You might have to hold reserves for three years and get it done in year three and build up the funds to do it. But our goal would be to plan out those projects based on priorities of citizens and based on you know the financial resources that we have available. We need to be strategic about how we are utilizing the precious tax dollars that property owners are contributing.

Miscellaneous

Community Volunteerism

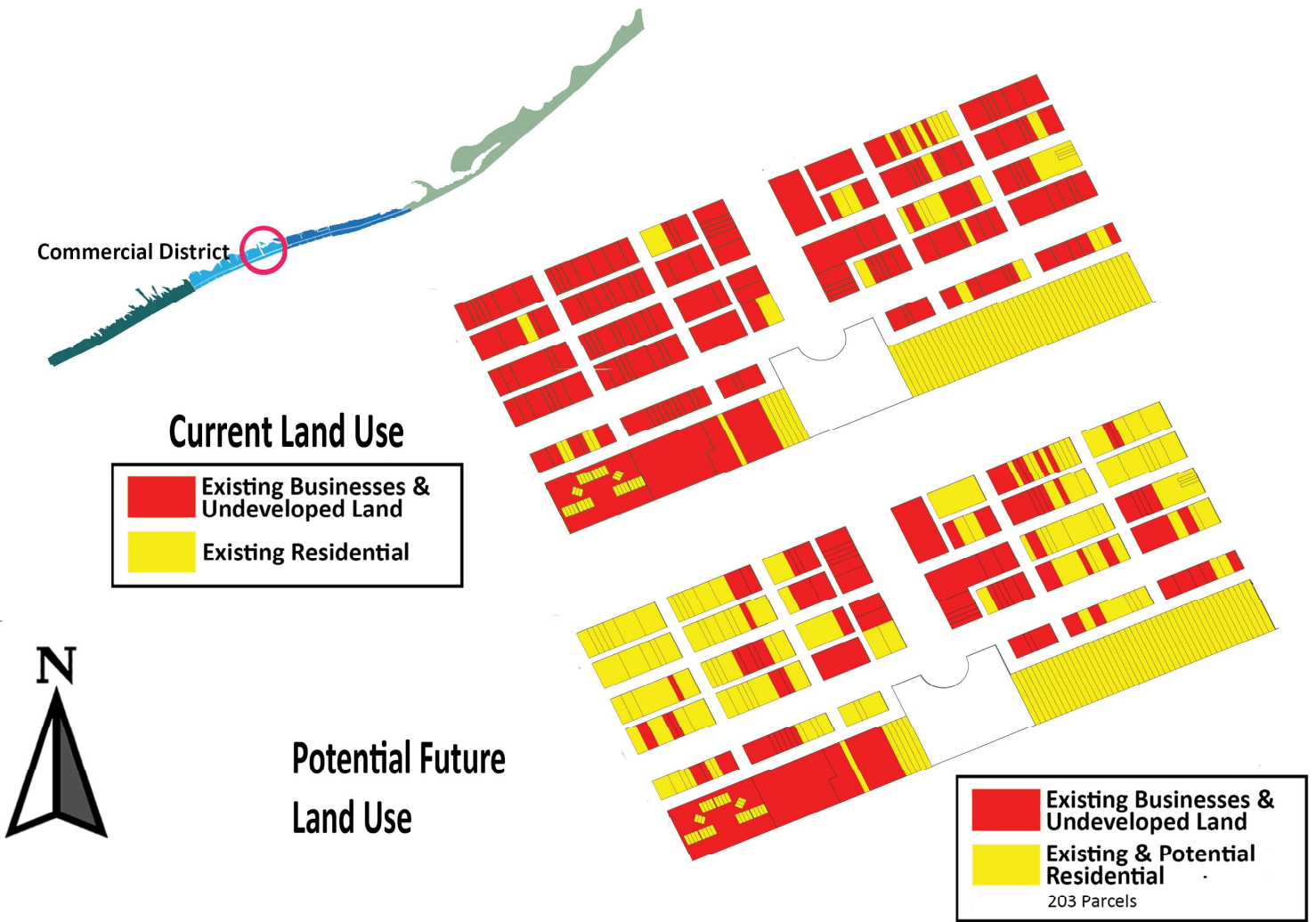
Will having local elected officials hurt local volunteerism?

- The bigger government gets, and the more money that a government spends the harder it is to have volunteers. That's why small towns generally have a lot of volunteers. The circumstances, with your community are such that, should you move in the direction of incorporation it would be a small town with a small budget, and so it would likely not affect volunteerism.

Appendix 3

St. George Island Commercial District Land Use Zoning Map

This graphic was displayed during the March 31 meeting discussion of zoning to help attendees visualize the Commercial District and its possible future if current development patterns persist.



Appendix 4

References

Florida State University. (2021). Community Visioning Session After-Action Report I.

Florida State University. (2021). Community Visioning Session After-Action Report II.