



July 27, 2022

Jim Hill, Mayor, City of Sebastian
1225 Main Street
Sebastian, FL 32958-4165

Dear Mayor Hill:

The joint mission of the four conservation organizations sending this letter includes maintaining the health and beauty of the St. Sebastian River -- a magnificent and beautiful natural resource in our "backyard." The river is one of the largest tributaries to the Indian River Lagoon and, specifically, the Indian River-Malabar to Vero Beach Aquatic Preserve. "Aquatic Preserves are state-owned sovereign submerged lands in areas which have exceptional biological, aesthetic, and scientific value.... set aside for the benefit of future generations." The River's environment is essential to the existence of a group of rare tropical fish and shrimp species found almost nowhere else in the United States. The snook and sleepers are targeted by river anglers while the smaller fish and shrimp support the aquatic food web. Unfortunately, all have declined in numbers and are now at risk because of the River's degraded condition.

Intensive development projects within the St. Sebastian River watershed, and adjacent to the South Prong of the River, creates reasonable cause for our concern.

As stated by Council member Bob McPartlan at the city council meeting May 25, 2022, the City of Sebastian, in consideration of annexing and future development of the Graves Brothers property, has a responsibility to intensively scrutinize this proposal and let the public have input on the annexation agreement.

The process for moving ahead with the annexation is complex, the individuals are many and the issues controversial. The undersigned organizations ask you to consider an independent planning consultant as essential to successfully completing the annexation process. An independent planning consultant with ecological and biological expertise would have the ability to assist the City with the review of the Graves Bros. annexation and guide the approval process. The independent consultant would handle the review and resolution process. A planning consultant brings more relevant skills to the process than those of an attorney or engineer.

Goals:

1. Complete the Graves Bros. annexation process professionally, thereby setting a precedent for future and inevitable annexations.
2. If and when the City of Sebastian decides to annex additional property, this precedent will provide thorough guidance by laying out a plan for well managed future growth.

Required planning consultant's qualifications include:

1. Expertise in biological, ecological, and stormwater management as well as development, county and state regulations, and the interests of our native fish and wildlife species as the basis of local business income and attractions for tourists;
2. Experience with previous local annexations;
3. Proven successful experience working with the county and local government and non-governmental entities;
4. Experience coordinating with local professionals, including engineers, surveyors, and professional county employees;
5. Oversee hiring all additional consulting professional personnel, and guide and supervise their work as necessary.

The consultant must have the respect of local entities to help reach a settlement that is fair for all parties involved.

The process must be managed correctly so the city does not have to incur expensive legal fees where only the attorneys win. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the City Council to promote a professional vision for the future land use and housing development in Sebastian.

With eager and inspirational cooperation and coordination of the stakeholders this annexation may present an opportunity for the city to grow while minimizing the impact to -- and in some creative ways enhancing -- our natural environment. There should be a "right" person or firm out there with the vision to help guide us in this venture. We will be happy to help identify that resource and recruit them to lead the process. We must ensure this endeavor sets a model for the future not only for the City, County and Graves Brothers, but also for all those who dream of their own future in Sebastian. Do this right and we leave a worthy legacy, do it haphazardly and you will tragically despoil the place where we live.

During the first public workshop we were informed that there would be a future workshop on the annexation agreement. That agreement is vital to laying the legally binding framework ensuring the goals and objectives of the City are met. At a minimum the annexation agreement should specify concrete criteria of open space, buffering of the headwaters of the St. Sebastian River, and future required dedications for public purposes.

It cannot be emphasized enough that the annexation process is when these things must be locked down. Simply stating that the city will address the major issues at the rezoning stage of the development process is inadequate because of the limited authority the city will have to negotiate with the developer under Florida law. The comprehensive plan stage is legislative, meaning the city is given wide leeway to work out a good plan with the landowner. At rezoning, the process is quasi-judicial, and the city will not have that type of discretion.

Thank you for your attention to this critical matter.

Sincerely,

Tim Glover, President, Friends of St. Sebastian River
Richard Baker, President, Pelican Island Audubon Society
Mike Johannsen, Chairman, Indian River Neighborhood Association
Paul Fafeita, President, Clean Water Coalition of Indian River County

Ccs: City Council Members and City Manager