A RESOLUTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHEREAS, extensive, unregulated commercial development of the island, without ethical review or oversight, threatens not only the Geechee Gullah people but also the island's beautiful natural resources and wildlife; and
WHEREAS, such development has been for the personal, private gain of the few at the expense of all of Georgia's citizens; and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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