

September 3, 2024

To Our Florida Representatives,

Thank you for your assistance in helping solve many of the problems in the State of Florida!

I am writing to you because I believe you can HELP us in Walton County. I am a long term, 40-year resident of the area. I have watched it grow from a sleepy fishing and beach village to one of the most sought out destination spots for people to vacation and move too. Obviously, when you live in an area of such breathtaking beauty, you naturally want others to experience that beauty as well.

During my 40 years here, my husband and I have raised our two children, we have walked the beaches for the South Walton Turtle Watch Conservation Group, we have opened 3 different restaurants, I have worked as a commissioned mosaic artist and local aquatic life canvas painter and our 25-year old restaurant, Vin'tij Food & Wine, has worked hand and hand with a variety of different local charities in our area. As a family, we have always loved living in Walton County, and we have worked hard to contribute to the well-being of our community. We have also been advocates for the "Conscious" growth of our area.

Recently, Walton County has changed, and not in a positive or beneficial way. We have witnessed the energy of this area radically become filled with feelings of violation, despair and anger because "Customary Use" of our beaches has been taken from us. Please understand, we have ALWAYS had "Customary Use" on our beaches until recently! Our white, powdered sugar sandy beaches and aqua blue ocean waters are the very reason many of us have been drawn to this area to live and vacation.

However, the passing of House Bill 631 Section 163.035 of Florida Statutes, specifically targeting Walton County Beaches, abruptly stopped "Customary Beach Use" for the locals and the visitors in Walton County. As of March 2024, an alarming number of homeowners along the beach in Walton County "now" own all the way to the water line. Because of this, many of the Walton County beaches are no longer accessible for those who do not own beachfront property.

The root cause of this problem began in 2010 when a politically powerful tourist from Arkansas began to build a 10,000 SQ.FT. beachfront mansion in Walton County. He decided he didn't want "anyone" to enjoy the beach in front of his beachfront house. This tourist from Arkansas, was Governor Mike Huckabee. He came to this area and spent 9 years creating conflict, chaos and exuberant legal fees for Walton County in order to have HIS selfish-will fulfilled.

Initially, because Walton County had a "Customary Use Ordinance" in place, Mr. Huckabee was prevented from getting what he wanted. Therefore, he utilized his power to get help from his friend, now Congressman Matt Gaetz, to push through Florida

House Bill 631. The Bill was introduced in November 2017 and signed by Governor Rick Scott in March 2018, which took power away from our local government.

After HB 631 was passed, a lawsuit involving over 1,100 beachfront owners was filed. The same Judge who granted “quiet titles” to beachfront homeowners, in the past, was now presiding over this recent case. This is a CLEAR conflict of interest, and the Judge did not recuse himself. The case ended because the Judge wanted to retire, and not surprisingly, he granted in favor of the beachfront homeowners, because he had already given “quiet titles” to many of them.

The beachfront home owners also do not pay taxes on the beaches they have quietly acquired. In fact, many of them don't live in Walton County permanently, they live in nearby states, and their newly acquired “private” beaches remain selfishly vacant with no one enjoying them. And to add insult to injury, Mike Huckabee, sold his beachfront house in 2020 and no longer lives here. However, his self-serving legacy and the negative consequences of removing the “customary beach use ordinance” lives on in our community.

Just recently, South Walton County (especially 30A) has started to watch its tourism tax dollars trickle down. We have also listened to local business owners who are not meeting their projected numbers, in addition, to people who are not able to lease their rental properties because they are not beachfront rentals. We feel this is just the beginning of what is to come. The main attraction for tourism in this area has always been our memorable, “customary use” beaches. If the open and free beaches are removed from the people, clearly, we can all see what the long-term effects of this is going to be – a loss on all levels of our local economy.

In our restaurant, we have listened to guests talk about their recent beach experiences, and they are stating "they are not coming back." There are too many “free beaches” in Florida, Alabama and Texas they can visit without all the stress, hardship, inconvenience, and conflict they are experiencing here. Our once beautiful and peaceful beaches have now become infected with ropes, orange cones, “No Trespassing Signs,” and non-sworn in beach patrol staff who educate our visitors about the new complicated beach rules. They also intimidatingly patrol up and down the beaches keeping people from sitting, walking, fishing or playing paddle ball on the dry sand where a beachfront house resides....their feet must be in the wet sand/water area or they can be charged with Trespassing!

The State Parks and public beach accesses are packed by 8:00am. The surrounding beach front communities such as Seaside, Watercolors, Rosemary Beach and Sandestin are also experiencing a congestion problem because all of their resort guests have to cram into a small area to enjoy the resort's beach areas. Guests can no longer sprawl out on the beach in front of the beachfront homes because that sand is considered PRIVATE.

Taking “Customary Use” away from the people has created a plethora of problems for Walton County, and we know it is only going to get more complicated. We are just now starting to witness the ramifications of the new beach laws and many of the businesses in Walton County are starting to suffer due to the sudden drop in tourism. In addition, social media is powerful and recently tourists have been expressing their negative beach experiences on a variety of social media platforms. Our guests and visitors from the surrounding States no longer feel welcomed while they vacation in Walton County.

The locals are also disappointed because many of us, not only moved here because of the beaches, but also because we felt this area would continue to be a thriving beachside community for our families to operate businesses in. However, the passing of HB 631 has changed the trajectory of this award-winning beach area. We will continue to see less people visit here because they can no longer enjoy our beaches in a way that they have always been able to experience the beaches in the past. This is going to be devastating for our local economy. Our surrounding visitors from Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Texas, Mississippi, Arkansas and Kentucky are also unhappy because their families can no longer create fond beach memories together when the Walton County Customary Beach Use Ordinance is not in effect.

Please join the fight to help us repeal HB 631 and return “Customary Use” to our beaches in Walton County. In addition, help this not spread to other beaches in Florida.

Sincerely,
Sabrina Reber