

From: Rick Frey

My remarks at last Monday's presentation to the St. Marys Planning Commission on the rezoning of the old Mill property from Mixed Use to Industrial are summarized as follows: There is considerable dissonance between the proponents of Industrial rezoning who see more jobs, help for local businesses and a general uptick in the local economy to the opponents who foresee a negative impact on the River and wetlands, more truck and train traffic over US 40 and neighborhood streets, more noise and ambient light from a 24/7 manufacturing/industrial operations and a general demise of our quaint and quiet Downtown St. Marys.

Let's face it folks, the Mill is dead and has been for the past 16 years and it is not coming back. St. Marys was forced to adapt and, during the past 16 years, much has changed for the better, despite the downturn in the economy Nationwide. The town has gone from a one-employer town to a retirement community for many and a bedroom community for those working in Fernandina Beach and Jacksonville. Many have found in St. Marys a hidden gem, an affordable, quiet, small town feel; a place to slow down, to retire and/or to raise a family with a quality of life far surpassing the less affordable, traffic, congestion, hustle, bustle and social problems of larger, more urban population centers like Jacksonville or other retirement communities along Florida's coast.

Yes, we have lost many small businesses in the process and much of our well educated workforce seek employment elsewhere. There are those who still believe that had the Mill continued, many businesses would still be thriving and jobs for a well trained workforce would be plentiful. The projections by the developers suggest only a minimum of employment, maybe 500 and mostly low tech jobs, not nearly enough to satisfy the needs of our annual high school graduation classes. The reality is that the Mill only provided employment to 1,000 people in its hay day. In fact, I have heard the story from many a local that they were poorly prepared to

compete in the workforce after the Mill closed knowing that when they left school, they expected to work in the Mill where Dad worked.

So, the culture of St. Marys has change from a one employer, industrial town to a residential coastal community of single family homes, retirement communities and the growth of small businesses to support the new culture. The current Mix Use zoning for the Mill site of residential and commercial uses is a reflection of this cultural change. And, frankly, had the housing bubble not burst, the development on the old Mill site to Mixed Use would be progressing as planned. A rezoning change back to Industrial with all the associated impact, is a step backward for this beautiful little community.

There are no assurances that to rezone the Mill site to Industrial will bring in the number of jobs promised to justify the cost. Much of these projections are gues-timates for the proponents to support the rezoning proposal. But think of the real estate value of the old Mill site within the new St. Marys culture: water front single family/multifamily residential building lots and small business commercial, convenient to downtown, marinas, I-95 to Jacksonville and the beaches. When the economy finally picks back up, and it will, and more and more families want out of Jacksonville metro area, and they are, and baby boomers, like me, looking for an affordable place to slow down or retire, St. Marys will be a choice location to live and raise a family, but not so much as an industrial town. If you don't believe me, just ask the folks in Fernandina Beach.