

In and around St. Marys this month....

The last few weeks were challenging for local businesses with our heavy reliance on tourism and the popularity of Cumberland Island. The federal government shutdown severely limited visitors to the city but it was encouraging to see how responsive local residents were in increasing their visits downtown to help business owners get past that hurdle.

We should all continue to support downtown merchants as they have creatively embraced the obstacles always created by construction changes during any period of improvement. From painting the new temporary boardwalk entrances to their establishments to stringing colorful lights and hanging flags and banners, our business community is looking forward to the new look downtown but not missing the opportunity to create a buzz about their businesses in the interim. It's great to see that spark of resilience. And it's great to start seeing visitors returning to Cumberland Island.

Rumors to the contrary, the annual Mardi Gras parade is still on schedule as planned for Saturday, March 2. The parade route will begin as usual on Meeting Street and continue to down to Conyers St. and for this parade it will turn right on Conyers ending at Wheeler Street. The vendors for the festival will be located on St. Marys Street from Wheeler St. to Bartlett St. to create additional foot traffic for downtown merchants and provide easy access to our restaurants and Gilman Waterfront Park.

Changes for the better are also in the planning stages at the Kings Bay Plaza in midtown. Bealls will be expanding their operation in a larger facility on the opposite side of the Plaza and expects to open that retail business in March. Current Verizon plans call for new construction to begin in March with an early summer opening. And for those with a sweet tooth, a new bakery is opening this month on the west side of town in the retail complex in front of Osprey Cove.

Now that the General Assembly is in session in Atlanta, St Marys officials will be joining other city and county officials and the Chamber of Commerce to deliver a coordinated message to state officials about the needs of Camden County. We are currently in Atlanta and meeting with appropriate senators, representatives and state officials addressing our agenda.

Of special interest to St. Marys residents, we will be seeking answers to the questions we keep hearing from citizens about the sad conditions at Exit 1. The lack of plantings to replace the tree massacre as well as the unfulfilled promises of improved lighting is high on our list. We are also still pushing for an updated and improved Welcome Center at Exit 1 because it is the first stop when anyone enters Georgia from the South and an improved Center could greatly benefit the state, county and city tourism appeal. We will also push for the state to create an additional safe crossing for St. Marys Middle School by adding a Hawk Beacon

down from Route 40 and the Charlie Smith Sr. intersection. We are also lobbying for a light at Colerain and Winding Road as the population of that area continues to grow and greater safety at that intersection should be a high priority for state safety officials.

We will meet with officials at the Georgia Soil and Water Conservation Commission to try and find a way to expedite the state mandated Land Disturbance Permits that have been adding time and cost to new home building schedules in St. Marys and throughout Camden County.

While all of these issues are controlled by state, not local, government, we consider it a responsibility to our citizens to make every effort to insure state officials understand the impact their decisions have on local residents and business owners. We recognize every other county and community will be making their cases as well, but if we fail to speak up and speak out we will be left behind. Please know that this trip to Atlanta is not the only endeavor but it is important because it is during the session.

One last note for the month, please remember to vote in the March 19 special election which will have voters consider SPLOST funding for another six years.