INTRODUCTION:
In Georgia’s southeastern-most corner, seven county commissioners hope to propel Georgia into the space age by building a rocket launching facility near the mouth of the Satilla River, but the costs could be substantial. Camden County taxpayers are already on the hook for millions, and the region’s important natural attractions, including Little Cumberland and Cumberland Islands, the rivers and creeks around them and the Atlantic Ocean, could be dramatically impacted. In the works since 2014, with each passing year, Spaceport Camden further secures its reputation as a “launch pad to nowhere.” Recent changes to Camden County’s launch license application with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) have increased the risks to the nearby residents and natural areas. Officials also continue to mislead the public on the economic benefits of the project and cloak much of the county's spaceport work in secrecy.

THE WATER BODY:
If built, Spaceport Camden would sit on the banks of Todd Creek, an important tributary to the Satilla River some four miles from the shores of Cumberland and Little Cumberland Islands. Christmas Creek, which divides the two islands, is said to be the best fishing spot on Georgia’s coast. The Atlantic Ocean crashes on the islands’ east-facing beaches and on the island’s leeward side is a network of some 10,000-acres of tidal marshes and creeks. These pristine waters are the reason up to 60,000 visitors come to Cumberland Island annually, supporting some 750 tourism-related jobs in Camden County alone and accounting for some $86.9 million in annual economic activity. Cumberland is home to the largest maritime forest on the east coast with some 19,000 acres protected, including more than 18 miles of undeveloped shoreline. In short, it is a coastal paradise playground for its year-round and seasonal residents and for those who visit for a day or more.
THE DIRT:

Typically when we send rockets into space, a 10 to 20-mile area surrounding the launch site and expected flight path must be evacuated. This is a precaution to protect human life in the event of a launch failure.

At the proposed Spaceport Camden site, there are residences and popular areas of the Cumberland Island National Seashore used by visitors within five miles of the proposed launch pad and within the flight path. Launches would force evacuations of residences on Little Cumberland, wilderness visitors and residents of Cumberland Island and commercial and recreational fishing vessels in the area. These evacuations would likely last at least 12 hours and could be extended for days.

Likewise, Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay, located less than 10 miles from the proposed launch site, may also be impacted, and Navy officials have voiced concerns about the project.

In documents obtained by the Southern Environmental Law Center last year, FAA officials commented that they had never seen “a site operator propose such close proximate population over flight to the launch point.”

This danger became even more worrisome when Camden County Commissioners, fearing that FAA would not permit a facility for medium lift-size rockets, changed its request to cover only small launch vehicles.

A National Aeronautics and Space Administration study of small launch missions between 2009 and 2016 determined that nearly 43 percent failed or partially failed—a failure rate nearly seven times that of medium lift-size rockets.

This change only heightens the threat of loss of life and fire and pollution on Little Cumberland and Cumberland Islands where there is no access to firefighting equipment.

Meanwhile the toll on Camden County taxpayers continues to rise. Commissioners have spent $7.5 million on the project and have committed at least an additional $10 million in funding to purchase the property for Spaceport Camden, a site that includes areas contaminated with hazardous waste with cleanup costs that will become the responsibility of Camden County taxpayers.

Throughout the process, county leaders have been less than transparent. In September, the Southern Environmental Law Center, on behalf of One Hundred Miles, amended an ongoing lawsuit seeking to force the county to comply with the Georgia Open Records Act. The county has withheld studies that show the impacts of rocket launch failures.

WHAT MUST BE DONE:

Currently, residents are attempting to secure signatures of more than 10 percent of registered voters in Camden County to force a referendum on the county’s decision to purchase property for the spaceport. In the face of this mounting opposition and continued complications in pursuing the project, Camden County Commissioners should finally abandon their spaceport plans. FAA is expected to issue a final Environmental Impact Statement for the project next spring.