INTRODUCTION:
Since time began, man has battled nature and perhaps no more so than when it comes to mitigating the impacts of floods. In the U.S., levees, dikes, dams, channelization of streams and other engineered “solutions” were the norm for most of the past 100 years. In Statesboro, the city’s primary stream—Little Lotts Creek—was heavily engineered during the later half of the 1900s in an effort to solve flooding problems. Today, rather than meandering through the floodplain as it would in its natural state, it flows almost perfectly straight in a man-made course for about three miles—much of it in a concrete-lined channel. The channel helps moves water from the downtown area more quickly, but it hasn’t solved all the problems and it’s come at the cost of stream health and aquatic habitat. In the past few decades, water managers have begun recognizing the limitations and the unintended consequences of these engineered solutions. Often they are more costly and less effective than simply prohibiting development within flood prone areas and allowing streams to function as they were intended. Yet, in Statesboro, a proposal to develop intown properties within the floodplain of Little Lotts Creek hinges on even more, costly, engineered solutions that will only further degrade the health of the creek and the larger streams it feeds. Local creek advocates are wondering if there’s not a better way.

THE WATER BODY:
Originating within the city limits of Statesboro and flowing through the heart of the town of 30,000 people, Little Lotts Creek is Statesboro’s seminal stream. It flows west to east across town separating Statesboro’s historic downtown on the north from the campus of Georgia Southern University to the south. It also sits squarely within a corridor along South Main Street that city leaders have targeted for revitalization as the city’s “Blue Mile.” Heavily impacted by historic channelization projects within the city, it flows southeast, receives the treated wastewater from the city’s sewage treatment plant and then winds more than 11 miles to join Lotts Creek and ultimately the Canoochee River. The Canoochee and its tributaries are known habitat for the federally protected shortnose sturgeon.
THE DIRT:

Creeks flood. That’s why federal, state and local ordinances attempt to restrict development within flood-prone areas. Flooding generally only becomes a problem when we build structures in the floodplain. Little Lotts Creek in Statesboro is no exception. Within the last 70 years, development in regularly flooded areas near the creek prompted extensive channelization and other flood-control measures along more than three miles of the stream. Building more structures in the floodplain that displace floodwater only adds to the problem.

Yet, along Little Lotts Creek, private developers partnering with local development authorities want to do just that: plunk down more than 20 commercial and residential structures overlooking the creek within the flood zone as part of what is being called “The Creek on The Blue Mile.”

The project hinges on the relocation of a quarter-mile of the creek and the construction of a stormwater dam to hold back a 25-acre “flood control” reservoir upstream of the development. That reservoir could displace some residents.

Proponents claim that the project would convert 75 acres of creekfront property from floodplain into development-ready lots, but the massive engineering required comes with costs…to taxpayers and the health of the creek.

Developers have not determined a price for the dam and reservoir, but claim that its costs would be covered by state, not local, tax dollars, including some $5.5. million in direct state funding and an additional $15.5 million in low-interest, state-backed loans.

While the price tag is to be determined, it’s certain the dam will impact the health of Little Lotts Creek and the Canoochee River. The dam will elevate water temperatures in the creek and decrease oxygen levels, a combination that would increase the production of methyl-mercury in the blackwater stream, leading to more fish being contaminated with the highly toxic pollutant. The ultimate result being fish not fit for human consumption in a region where state regulators already warn against eating fish caught from local streams due to mercury contamination.

The dam and reservoir would also likely decrease the total discharge of water from Little Lotts Creek, ultimately effecting flows in the Canoochee, which has already experienced significant loss in average water discharge over the past several decades.

As proposed, the creek would flow through the developed corridor along a mostly hardened, man-made stream channel and banks that would support considerably less aquatic life than a natural stream bed featuring vegetated and shaded banks.

WHAT MUST BE DONE:

Currently, consultants are working on a $832,000 feasibility study for the project. During the study, impacts to Little Lotts Creek should be evaluated. Alternatives that involve restoring portions of the already heavily-engineered creek to its natural state and preserving, rather than building within, the existing floodplain should be explored.

For More Information Contact:
Damon Mullis, Ogeechee Riverkeeper, 866-942-6222, damon@ogeecheeriverkeeper.org