

Taxpayer money washing away

By Dr. Orrin Pilkey and Andrew S. Coburn

There have now been two referendums regarding beach nourishment in North Carolina. Both have failed. Big time.

In 2000, residents of Carteret County voted down a proposed \$30 million bond proposal to nourish beaches in order to protect oceanfront property in the Bogue Banks communities of Pine Knoll Shores, Indian Beach and Emerald Isle. The same sentiment was recently echoed in Dare County where nearly 80 percent voted to repeal a 1 percent sales tax imposed by county leaders to fund beach nourishment.

What's happening here? How can local citizens — those who use the beach most and, according to nourishment proponents, stand to benefit most from beach nourishment — not want it? Maybe it's due to lingering questions over the effectiveness of a beach or environmental impacts of beach nourishment. Whatever the reason, one thing is clear: Dare and Carteret County citizens do not want to pay to protect the investments of those who willingly chose to own property next to an eroding beach.

What if we had a statewide referendum on the expenditure of state tax money to nourish beaches in order to protect expensive beachfront property? We suspect North Carolinians would overwhelmingly reject the idea, too. So why does the state spend millions of dollars every year doing just this?

Could it be that the state simply doesn't care if North Carolinians don't want their beaches to be nourished? It's more complex than that, of course, but the bottom line is that the state has spent, and will continue to spend, millions of tax dollars on questionable projects that do little more than encourage ever denser and ever more high rise developments.

Using tax money to protect the investments of individuals and corporations wealthy enough to afford multimillion-dollar oceanfront rental properties is one thing. Ruining the public beach in the process is quite another.

North Carolina has had a run of very poor quality (muddy, shelly, rocky) nourished beaches over the last five years all funded — at least in part — with state tax money. For example, when Emerald Isle came up short on its recent beach nourishment project, the N.C. Division of Water Resources stepped in and gave the town almost \$4 million without hesitation. DWR apparently chose to ignore the fact that sand would be mined from nearby Bogue Inlet (a damaging process that eventually leads to erosion along adjacent beaches), that public money would be used to restore large sections of private beach in front of gated communities and that public access to the entire beach was woefully and clearly inadequate.

So what would happen if the entire state voted to not use tax money to protect beachfront property? What if beaches were allowed to move naturally? For starters, we estimate the state might save \$600 million per decade (if all developed beaches were nourished). And if we remove beachfront buildings before their time comes, we'll also have beaches that are clean and healthy.

But no beachfront property owner is going to move a cash cow rental property when the state is all too eager to step in and protect it. Through its actions, the state has effectively transferred the costs of owning property in the most vulnerable, dynamic and unpredictable environments on earth (See Katrina, Rita, Ophelia, Isabel, Floyd, Fran, Bertha, Andrew, Hugo, etc.) to you, your children and your grandchildren. Without any of the benefits.

That's a pretty sweet deal — if you own beachfront property. But the overwhelming majority of North Carolinians don't, and you might be asking yourself what you can do about it.

For starters, you can tell your representatives in Raleigh to stop doling out tax money for extravagant and environmentally damaging beach nourishment projects and revisit the idea of a strategic coastal retreat alternative. There is absolutely no reason — except not wanting to — why buildings cannot be moved away from the shoreline.

If threatened beachfront buildings are removed before erosion — or a storm — catches up with them, the costs to society will be reduced and the quality of the beach for future generations will be forever maintained.

However it is done, the time has come to seriously consider retreating as the shorelines retreat. It won't be easy, and there are a lot of complex issues at hand, but if preserving our beautiful beaches for our children and grandchildren is a high priority, we really have no choice.

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