

Masthead

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Fight over NJ beach sand replenishment gets dirty

LONG BEACH TOWNSHIP, N.J. -- The line in the sand is drawn in this New Jersey shore community, where township officials say they'll use "peer pressure" to pit neighbor against neighbor in an effort to persuade 230 oceanfront property owners to let a beach restoration project proceed.

The holdouts are refusing to sign on because they don't want their views of the ocean blocked and because they fear the government might build a boardwalk or toilets next to their homes. So the township says it hopes neighbors will coax, shame or force holdouts to sign, and it's even encouraging them to picket outside the homes of those who won't give in.

"Long Beach Township is talking about anarchy here," said Kenneth Porro, an attorney for the holdouts.

"They're asking for people to harass those who won't sign," he said. "All these homeowners want is to be able to continue to enjoy their ocean views, breezes and access. Why would anybody buy an oceanfront property to look out at a wall of sand?"

Mayor Joseph Mancini counters that the community wants the beach restored because everyone uses and enjoys it.

"We're not going to let holdouts hold up the project," he said. "We want to get their neighbors involved and tell them what's going on. If they get some phone calls from their neighbors and longtime friends, that may help change some minds."

Few people deny the need for more sand on Long Beach Island, a narrow 18-mile barrier island growing narrower with each passing storm.

Particularly exposed is Long Beach Township's 12 miles of coastline, where erosion has caused sand around the 90th Street beach to fall off to a 30-foot drop. Once-buried wooden pilings that used to support an oceanfront house's deck and rear stairs now jut into the air; steel support beams that keep the house itself from slipping into the waves are exposed to the pounding surf; and a concrete base that holds up a utility pole is half-exposed.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers hopes to begin the beach project this summer but can't until all oceanfront property owners have signed easements permitting new sand to be pumped ashore onto part of their property. So far, 225 have

signed, but 230 others have not.

Phone calls are not all the mayor has in mind; Mancini suggests "peer pressure" and says people should picket outside the homes of particularly stubborn holdouts.

Hank DiPasquale, who has lived near the beach for nearly 40 years, is ready to grab a sign and march.

"The holdouts are affecting everyone on the island because we're all endangered," he said. He said he plans to call or visit neighbors who haven't yet signed the easements.

William Kunz owns an oceanfront house and initially refused to sign his easement, fearing public toilets and parking near his beach. But he changed his mind last year after a court decision striking down state regulations mandating public bathrooms and parking at certain intervals along the coast.

Now he's phoning recalcitrant neighbors and is willing to picket in front of their homes.

"We should all be in this together," he said. "I've spoken to some very reasonable people who feel the government is taking away their property rights. Nothing could be further from the truth. It's just an easement to put more sand there."

Bob Irvine also signed after having his fears eased about boardwalks and bathrooms. Two of his neighbors, however, have not, and he plans to discuss the issue with them.

"This year, with the five nor'easters we've had, numerous homes in Long Beach Township are in serious jeopardy," he said.

So far, no protests have been scheduled. But the prospect of demonstrations outside the million-dollar homes on the tranquil beachfront has upset many oceanfront homeowners.

Porro represents 67 oceanfront homeowners on Long Beach Island, about half of whom live in Long Beach Township. Many of them fear that signing the easements will give government the right to build a boardwalk or place public toilets or allow vehicles to drive on the sand behind their homes, he said.

But township attorney Richard Shackleton sent letters to each affected homeowner pointing out that the easements do not permit the Army Corps to do any of those things.

The sand dunes would be no higher than 22 feet - less than the height of some of the better-developed dunes that exist now. Mancini said the township has tried to accommodate oceanfront homeowners' concerns about not being able to see the ocean by allowing them to raise their houses 24 feet off the ground.

Farther north on Long Beach Island, the borough of Harvey Cedars was faced with a similar predicament two years ago, with a handful of property owners refusing to sign easements for the beach replenishment project. Harvey Cedars used eminent domain to condemn the land that owners wouldn't sign over but had to pay compensation for lost views and breezes as determined by a court-appointed panel.

The borough offered \$300 apiece as compensation, but the first few properties won in excess of \$400,000 apiece - amounts that the borough is appealing. Long Beach Township homeowners are well aware of what the oceanfront land of their neighbors to the north is worth.

"If the township wanted to pay me \$600,000, I'd do it," said Dan Lundy, one of the oceanfront holdouts. "Why should I give it away?"

Long Beach Township officials say eminent domain and its potential costs are a last resort.

Mancini said he or other township workers call six to 10 holdouts each day, trying to explain the benefits of beach replenishment and assure them that government has no plans for boardwalks or other major changes to the coastline.

"I don't know what they're thinking," he said. "To take a \$3 million investment in your home - where your children and grandchildren come to go to the beach - and allow it to slip into the waves is the stupidest thing I can imagine."