

North Carolina Puts Islanders on Notice: Toss Sandbags

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FIGURE EIGHT ISLAND, N.C. — A fair shot to save his property. That is all Michael Hobbs says he is requesting. His oceanfront home is one of nearly 20 near the north end of this private island that rely on sandbags to hold back the Atlantic.

“We just want permission to spend our own money,” said Mr. Hobbs, a 30-year owner here.

But proponents of the state’s toughening stance on sandbags say regulators have been fair.

“Every single person out there knew they couldn’t keep their bags indefinitely,” said Andy Coburn of the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines at Western Carolina University.

This month the state’s Coastal Resources Commission will hear the first appeals from the 20 or so owners whose sandbags have been deemed the worst offenders.

The state has identified 150 or so sandbagged structures that have outlived their permitted lifespan, which was generally five years, and need to come out. Most are on the Outer Banks. But Figure Eight Island and Ocean Isle Beach, both near Wilmington, have some, too.

For Mr. Hobbs, the issue is not that owners are unwilling to work to save their homes. It is that the state will not let them. “If we want to spend our own private money to protect our own private property, why can’t we?”

The options for homeowners and communities are largely limited to the “temporary” sandbags or expensive beach nourishment projects that can take years to win regulatory approval.

North Carolina has a longstanding policy, made law in 2003, against hardened structures on the coast, based on evidence they only shift erosion.

Jim Stephenson of the North Carolina Coastal Federation, said oceanfront property was unique because it bordered on elastic public land, the beach, not fixed by property lines.

Mr. Stephenson said most homeowners had had ample time to find solutions to their erosion woes. Yet their only answer in almost all cases was to seek extension after extension for their “temporary” sandbags.

On Figure Eight, Tropical Storm Hanna in early September and a no-name storm that came later exacerbated the problems.

For a longer-term solution, Figure Eight would like to shift the main channel in nearby Rich Inlet to allow sand to collect on the north end’s inlet-influenced beach. But the proposed project is a long way from winning regulatory approval.

Mr. Hobbs said he thought homeowners should be allowed to keep their bags until then. “Who are we hurting if we do?” he said. “More importantly, what other option do we have?”