

37

[back to article](#)

StarNewsOnline.com

---

# Proposed coastal fund would pay to remove threatened oceanfront structures

By [Gareth McGrath](#)  
Staff Writer

Published: Thursday, February 26, 2009 at 10:55 a.m.

Retreat.

It's not a word often uttered by coastal officials who rely on proximity to the beach for the tourists who drive their local economies.

But two weeks ago the N.C. Coastal Resources Commission and its advisory board unanimously passed a resolution that could open the door to taxpayers helping with the removal of threatened oceanfront structures.

Granted, retreat wasn't the word used in the resolution asking the General Assembly to consider creating a state trust fund to help finance "coastal infrastructure projects."

"Removal of structures encroaching onto public beach areas" was just one of several proposed uses of the funds, which also included beach nourishment, inlet channel realignment, beach access and dredging projects.

Beaches below the high-water mark are public property in North Carolina. So as a beach erodes, oceanfront homeowners can quickly find themselves in the public right of way as their sandy private property is washed away.

## KEEPING BEACHES PUBLIC

That retreat was included in the resolution could signal a new awareness that North Carolina can't afford to defend all of its oceanfront development while facing sea-level rise, shrinking budgets, tightening environmental regulations, a dearth of sand in some places and persistent political opposition by some to fighting an unwinnable battle against Mother Nature.

But Dara Royal, an Oak Island councilwoman and chair of the advisory council, said she saw inclusion of retreat in the resolution as a more pragmatic move.

"The two choices right now for managing the shoreline are beach nourishment or retreat," she said. "And if we're providing funding for one, then I think you should also provide funding for the other, because at the end of the day both are intended to provide for a public beach."

Royal said the primary purpose of the resolution was to develop a dedicated funding mechanism for the Beach Inlet Management Plan that's under development.

It will be the first comprehensive, coastwide look at how North Carolina should best manage its coastal resources.

Those strategies could include retreat in some developed areas where it's simply not economical or feasible to hold off the encroaching ocean, Royal said. A place with insufficient sand sources is an example.

But without funding, officials fear the study could end up, like so many other reports, simply gathering dust on a shelf.

### **FOOTING THE BILL**

Along with federal funding, the potential revenue streams mentioned in the resolution include state and local sales tax proceeds and funds generated by North Carolina's saltwater fishing license program.

Pender County's Joan Weld, who is vice chairwoman of the CRC, said she liked that the study proposal was comprehensive and offered specific project and funding ideas.

"Otherwise it's just a resolution, and it's not going to go anywhere," she said.

Weld added that she also was happy to see retreat formally mentioned as one of the options for protecting and maintaining the coast's public resources.

"A lot of people don't like to use that word," she said. "But we have to."

But it could be tough to win political and public support for spending public money on the removal of structures that were approved by local planning officials and purchased by private individuals.

North Carolina is a "buyer-beware" state, which encompasses the principle that a buyer is purchasing property at his or her own risk.

In most recent cases, individual property owners or towns have paid for the removal of threatened oceanfront structures.

That list includes North Topsail Beach, where town officials are demolishing six homes at the town's eroded north end that they condemned and eventually bought from the owners.

But a less successful attempt at using public funds occurred in 2006, when a majority of condominium owners at The Riggings in Kure Beach turned down a federal buyout

proposal that would have seen them rebuild their threatened homes across U.S. 421.

The decision to reject the Federal Emergency Management grant frustrated many officials, including U.S. Rep. Mike McIntyre, D-N.C.

But the homeowners said the proposal didn't offer them fair value for their properties, which have relied on sandbags to hold back the encroaching Atlantic since 1985, and would have cost them significant out-of-pocket expenses.

Gareth McGrath: 343-2384

[gareth.mcgrath@starnewsonline.com](mailto:gareth.mcgrath@starnewsonline.com)

---