

Moving back makes the most sea sense

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CULLOWHEE - North Carolina is rapidly back-pedaling from the decades-old policy of sound coastal management that has prohibited use of "hard structures" to protect coastal property from erosion and storms.

Last month the state Senate passed SB 599, which authorizes the Coastal Resources Commission to implement a pilot project allowing the use of "terminal groins" to stabilize ocean inlets. This bill, if it becomes law, would lead the state down the slippery slope of coastal engineering as a solution for protecting private property threatened by coastal erosion and storms. This would be a disaster.

Let's remind ourselves why natural, coastal erosion threatens some properties. They are too close to the ocean.

Let's also remember that we live in an era of a global warming-induced sea level rise. The rate of coastal erosion will only increase in the future. A recent study in the journal *Science* reported that actual tide gauge data indicate that global sea level is rising even faster than the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has predicted. In other words, maintaining the integrity of oceanfront investment property is going to become increasingly difficult and costly with time.

North Carolina's regulatory prohibition on coastal hard structures was enacted to prevent an environmentally damaging and costly response to beach erosion. It was forward-looking legislation that, for the most part, has protected the integrity of our public beaches and promoted the wise management of public trust lands.

To a large extent, recent efforts to change state law and permit coastal hard structures are nothing more than a desperate attempt by some members of the oceanfront community to protect risky but lucrative investments.

Unfortunately, advocates for oceanfront property owners seem to forget that North Carolina's beaches and inlets belong to all North Carolinians. Even the private enclave of Figure Eight Island does not own the intertidal beach. We all own it.

What right do oceanfront property owners have to change our beaches into experimental construction zones aimed primarily at the protection of private property? If one small group is permitted to test a terminal groin (otherwise known as a jetty) for the protection of private property, how can the state not allow other property owners to do the same -- or experiment with other "hard" solutions?

If the proposed structures are allowed, the doors to coastal engineering will be blown wide open. And once they are, litigation will follow. North Carolina has been largely spared the endless lawsuits that states such as Florida have experienced as judges attempt to sort out the real and alleged impacts that hard erosion control structures have on neighboring property. Coastal engineering causes more problems than it solves.

WE FEAR THAT THE COASTAL DEVELOPMENT LOBBY IN NORTH CAROLINA is poised to overturn years of scientific consensus. The state Department of Environment and Natural Resources, for example, has commissioned a new, comprehensive Beach and Inlet Management Plan. Those producing the plan are supposed to gather as much objective data as possible before proposing any potential management solutions. We were shocked to learn that Land Management Group, one of the firms awarded the contract by DENR to develop the plan, has already advocated the experimental use of hard structures.

A June 12 e-mail from Land Management Group to the members of the House Environment and Natural Resources Committee promotes the use "well-planned stabilization efforts" while lobbying to support SB 599.

Rather than focusing on the impossible task of trying to defend the current line of oceanfront property against sea-level rise and against coastal erosion and future storms, the new beach and inlet plan should seriously investigate the practicality and economics of a proactive, strategic relocation of infrastructure away from vulnerable sections of shoreline.

Although we believe this option will prove the most fiscally conservative and environmentally sound over the long run, it has never been seriously considered or discussed by DENR, because oceanfront property owners are unlikely to embrace it. But exploring relocation as a possible management alternative will almost certainly benefit the 99.99 percent of all North Carolinians who do not own oceanfront investment property.

The state has nothing to lose and everything to gain. And besides, strategic relocation may even save the lives of those who scoff so heartily at the rhetoric of the opposition.

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