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State needs to provide annual funding for beaches

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Topsail Voice

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We are pleased that N. C. Senators, Harry Brown (R-Onslow, Jones) and R.C. Soles (D-Pender, Brunswick, Columbus) have introduced two bills seeking to fund beach nourishment projects on Topsail Island beaches.

Because Topsail Island is divided by the county line, one portion in Onslow and the other half in Pender, the senators are seeking \$2 million each for separate projects on the Island.

But this effort should represent only the beginning of a long term commitment on the part of the state to participate in beach nourishment and maintenance projects along the state's coastline.

Just as our mountains and parks are public trust resources, so are our beaches.

But not only are our beaches a natural resource, they are also a key component in our very valuable tourist industry that impacts the state economy as well as the nearby local economies.

According to the NC Department of Commerce, tourism generated \$16.5 billion in gross revenues across the state last year, directly supported 190,900 jobs and generated over \$2.5 billion in tax receipts.

Those are large numbers that should not and cannot be ignored.

Currently the responsibility of beach management and nourishment fall primarily on the local beach communities and counties. Until very recently the federal government has provided financial support with certain strings attached such as mandating that public access be built and maintained so that visitors can park and have access to the managed beaches.

Federal support has slowly eroded away forcing beach communities to cover more of the costs for management and nourishment

Considering the importance of the state's beaches to the overall state economy and tourism industry, it is only fitting that the state play more of a financial role in the beach management.

With the continued absence of federal support, Topsail Island's beach communities are looking for a variety of funding sources for their beach projects including creating special tax districts and considering limiting free access to beaches.

But renewed interest is needed by pooling local, county and state funds to create a sustainable beach management plan for all NC beaches.

The local governments should not have to ask their property owners to shoulder the lion's share of the cost for beach projects when the end result is so beneficial to the entire state.

The beaches need to be kept nourished and healthy. Without continuous state funding, beach communities will not have the means to maintain their beaches due to the increasing costs and massive amounts of paper work and permits required by a variety of state and federal agencies.

Without good beaches, tourists will take their dollars to other states resulting in lost revenues for our schools and public services. While we do appreciate the efforts of Senators Brown and Soles, it should represent only the beginning of a long term plan to protect our state's beaches and the economic benefits they generate.