

When storms batter islands, taxpayers pick up tab

By Russ Bynum, Associated Press Writer

TYBEE ISLAND, Ga. — Scraped away by two storms since last year, the beach vanishes behind Carlyle Buevas' home at high tide, when waves lick the dune a few feet from her back porch and lap at the unprotected rental condos next door.

Buevas has watched Georgia's largest public beach slowly weather away since 2000. Subtropical Storm Andrea in May 2007 and Tropical Storm Fay two weeks greatly accelerated the damage, even though the centers of both storms missed the island by at least 100 miles.

Fragile barrier islands from Texas to New England take a beating, especially during hurricane season, that cause their beachfronts to wash away and gradually return with the tides. The shape of their sandy shores shifts over time but the islands survive, if left alone.

Yet authorities spend large sums to "fix" them by replenishing sand and other measures, mindful of their appeal to tourists and of the multimillion-dollar beachfront homes along their shores.

It's a pricey fight against Mother Nature that rarely causes the kind of uproar that has accompanied the rebuilding of New Orleans -- another spot that's hardly ideal for habitation.

"I hear a lot of people say you'd have to be crazy or stupid to build on the oceanfront, and it's not crazy because people are making a lot of money doing it," said Rob Young, a coastal development expert at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, N.C.

"The crazy people are the federal taxpayers who are willing to subsidize that economy."

Though Hurricane Gustav spared New Orleans the Katrina repeat that some had feared this week, some experts have renewed the debate over whether it was worth pumping billions of dollars into a city that could be ravaged again.

Young, director of WCU's Program for Study of Developed Shorelines, says a better case could be made that barrier islands aren't worth rebuilding. New Orleans, he argues, has more than 300,000 residents who live and work there year-round. The coastal islands are home mostly to retirees and investment properties.

Young points to Dauphin Island, Ala., where Hurricane Gustav washed away a new sand berm, 10-feet high and 14,000-feet long, that completed last year to replace the old buffer destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The sand barrier, build to protect resort homes on the island's west end, cost \$3.6 million that came mostly from FEMA disaster funds.

It's the third time since Hurricane Georges in 1998 that Dauphin Island's manmade protective dunes have been wiped out by hurricanes.

Dauphin Island Mayor Jeff Collier says repairing the island is important to more than just his 1,300 residents who own private property and the \$1 million boost tourists give the town's budget each year. He says the mile-wide path Katrina cut through the island has flushed unwanted saltwater into the Mississippi Sound north of Dauphin Island, threatening fish and crabs and devastating the livelihoods of oyster fisherman whose catches are drying up.

"If you start saying, 'Why should we spend all this tax money to protect \$1 million homes on the beach,' you're not going to get a whole lot of sympathy," Collier said. "But there's much more to it."

As Tropical Storm Hanna approached the Carolinas on Friday, with Hurricane Ike closing in on the coast fast behind, officials worried that wind and surf could erode the beaches at the heart of South Carolina's \$16 billion tourism industry.

Fay got close enough to Hunting Island near Beaufort, S.C., to erode a road and damage three buildings at the state park there. The state spent more than \$8 million last year to pour sand on sections of the beach and install walls perpendicular to the beach intended to catch sand.

Palm Beach County, Fla., with barrier islands along its entire 46 miles of coast, spends \$10 million each year to fix beaches packed with multimillion-dollar homes, high-rise condos and hotels.

Leanne Welch, the county's environmental program supervisor for shore protection, calls it a "constant battle against Mother Nature to keep sand on the beaches."

But she sees little choice. With huge private mansions lining much of the Florida coast, she says, what could be done to reverse the trend?

"Some of the homes on the ocean are \$100 million. We just can't afford to buy every home," Welch said.

Tybee Island, 12 miles east of Savannah, hasn't had a direct hit from a major hurricane in more than a century. It's largely a middle-class beach destination, affectionately nicknamed the "Truck Stop By the Sea," though retiring baby boomers and real-estate investors have given its population of 3,400 an upper-crust makeover in the last decade.

Towering homes on stilts near the beach list for \$3 million and one-bed, one-bath condos go for nearly \$700,000. Actress Sandra Bullock and rocker John Mellencamp own homes here.

Since 1975, Tybee Island has relied on federal money to renourish its beach every seven years. The last time that happened was 2000, and residents say a new round is long overdue.

"There used to be beach here 24 hours a day, and now water comes over the seawall twice a day," said Buelvas, 68, who retired with her husband to their 3,000-square foot beach home in 2000. "I'd say it's desperate at this point."

Next month, officials will begin pumping about 120,000 dump-truck loads of fresh sand on Tybee Island's beach, with taxpayers footing the \$10 million bill. Tybee Mayor Jason Buelterman had to fight for the \$6.3 million federal share of the project.

Buelterman got Congress to approve the money after an Army Corps of Engineers study showed much of Tybee Island's erosion could be blamed on the federal government. The study found sand that normally would drift from South Carolina to replenish the island's north beach is sinking into the Savannah River, dredged by the Corps to allow the passage of large cargo ships, a method employed at numerous other U.S. ports, including Mobile Bay by Dauphin Island.

Buelvas lives along the most damaged stretch of Tybee Island, about a 10th of a mile, where the beach vanishes at high tide. Despite the risk, she says she wouldn't live anywhere else.

"People who live in San Francisco take a chance on being done in by earthquakes. Midwesterners take a chance with tornadoes," she said. "Is there anywhere in this country that's risk-free?"