

Committee plans to seek long-term solutions to beach erosion

By [Gareth McGrath](#)
Staff Writer

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North Carolina's decades-long ban on hardened structures along the coast has long been showing some holes. Now, it could be close to crumbling.

The N.C. Coastal Resources Commission (CRC) has formed a special committee to explore long-term solutions to the state's growing beach erosion problem, and permanent erosion-control structures such as groins and jetties are expected to be high on the list for discussion.

The committee will meet for the first time May 9. Its recommendations, if approved by the whole CRC, would then be forwarded to the General Assembly and the governor.

"I see it as a cry for help from the CRC on the sandbag issue," said Caswell Beach Mayor Harry Simmons, executive director of the N.C. Beach, Inlet and Waterway Association, an advocacy group for coastal communities and interests. "I think the hope is to find some stability, and stability is something sandbags as a temporary erosion-control structures aren't designed to deal with."

But supporters of the current ban on new seawalls, jetties and groins say it has helped keep North Carolina's beaches the envy of other states.

"It's been extremely successful and has allowed beaches and inlets to remain public and natural," said Jim Stephenson, coastal policy analyst for the N.C. Coastal Federation.

CRC Chairman Bob Emory said everything is on the table for discussion. But he cautioned that the new committee, of which he's a member, wouldn't rush to a decision.

Emory added that he would like to explore ways to get the state more involved in beach nourishment, including providing more funding, before allowing hardened structures.

The search for long-term answers comes as coastal regulators plan to ask property owners to remove most of the exposed sandbags along the state's beaches by Thursday.

That decision has unleashed a tidal wave of extension requests from worried property owners, with many threatening legal action if they are forced to pull out their bags.

Many commission members are uncomfortable as well, with some wondering how they can tell some homeowners their sandbags have to come out while allowing others just down the beach to install them.

Jim Leutze, a CRC member and former chancellor of the University of North Carolina Wilmington, said the state's current sandbag policy hardly seems fair.

Leutze said the state needs to either accept the idea that it will have to spend more money on beach nourishment or modify its ban on hardened structures.

"I've heard all of the objections," he said. "However, I think we have to review this situation in light of heightened sea-level rise, the amount of property at risk and that the highest erosion rates are around inlets."

Ocean Isle Beach, Figure Eight Island, North Topsail Beach and Emerald Isle all have significant erosion problems around inlets.

But state law is clear. Strengthened several years ago, the law outlaws any erosion-control structures along the coast except in certain cases, such as to protect roads or historic sites.

Even so, support is growing for changing the rules, especially near volatile inlets.

State Sen. Marc Basnight, a Dare County Democrat who heads the state Senate, last year expressed his support for Figure Eight Island's proposal to build an experimental groin adjacent to Rich Inlet.

Opponents say one hardened structure, which will trap sand, simply begets another one farther down the beach built by property owners worried about their own stretches of sand.

But backers of Figure Eight's proposal say they only want to build a low-slung, short structure - dubbed a terminal groin - that would capture just enough sand to rebuild and stabilize the nearby eroded beach, allowing additional sand to bypass the groin. A bill that would allow the project is expected to be taken up by the General Assembly during the upcoming short session.

Environmentalists and some researchers, however, aren't even convinced that such a structure would work.

Andy Coburn, associate director of the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines at Western Carolina University, said he's found 18 structures similar to what Figure Eight is proposing in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida.

He said nearly 161 million cubic yards of sand at a cost of roughly \$800 million have been pumped onto the beaches around 17 of the 18 structures over the past few decades.

"There's no way of knowing how much erosion would have occurred without those periodic nourishments," Coburn said. "But I'd say it's our expert and professional opinion that these things do not reduce the need for beach nourishment."

But retreat, an option often promoted by environmentalists, isn't a realistic solution to the coast's growing problem, said Ocean Isle Beach Mayor Debbie Smith.

"You just can't tell a homeowner his only option is to give up his house up and move," she said. "That's not a viable option in today's world."

Gareth McGrath: 343-2384

gareth.mcgrath@starnewsonline.com