

Figure Eight owners want to keep their sandbags

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Figure Eight Island | A fair shot to save his property. That's all Michael Hobbs is asking. His oceanfront home on this private island is one of nearly 20 near the north end that rely on sandbags to hold back the encroaching Atlantic.

"We just want permission to spend our own money," said Hobbs, who has seen the beach and dunes come and go during the nearly 30 years he's owned property on Figure Eight.

But proponents of the state's toughening stance on sandbags say coastal regulators have been more than fair, even lax in enforcing the rules for property owners who have used sandbags to stop the ocean's relentless march.

"Every single person out there knew they couldn't keep their bags indefinitely," said Andy Coburn, associate director of the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines at Western Carolina University.

Next month the N.C. Coastal Resources Commission will hear the first appeals from the roughly 20 property owners whose sandbags have been deemed the worst offenders along the coast due to their size and time on the beach.

All told the state has identified 150 or so sandbagged structures that have outlived their permitted lifespan, which was generally five years, and need to come out.

Most of the targeted sandbags, some of which have been on the beach for more than 14 years, are on the Outer Banks. But Figure Eight Island and Ocean Isle Beach have their fair share also, although none are in this first batch slated for removal.

For Hobbs, the issue isn't that homeowners like him aren't willing to work toward saving their threatened homes. It's that the state won't let them do it.

"If we want to spend our own private money to protect our own private property, why can't we?" he said. "We're not asking for any help or special treatment. Just a chance to try and save our property."

But the options for homeowners and coastal communities are largely limited to sandbags, which are supposed to be a temporary solution, or expensive beach nourishment projects that can take years to win regulatory approval.

That's because North Carolina has a longstanding policy, codified into law in 2003, against hardened structures along the coast. It's based on evidence such structures merely shift erosion to nearby areas.

Hobbs, a Connecticut resident, said the sight of homes falling into the ocean would be disastrous, not only for the impacted property owner but for beach communities up and down the coast as tourists stay away and oceanfront property values tumble.

"I just can't see any kind of benefit to the state of North Carolina that is commensurate to the cost if they are removed," he said, adding there's little doubt that property would be lost if the bags are pulled.

But Jim Stephenson, policy analyst for the N.C. Coastal Federation, said oceanfront property is unique because it borders on elastic public land – the beach – that isn't fixed by property lines.

He said that in most cases, homeowners have had ample time to develop solutions to their erosion woes. Yet their only answer in almost all cases was to seek extension after extension for their "temporary" sandbags.

But Stephenson did agree that there would be economic repercussions for coastal communities if homes started getting washed away.

"Having a house fall in the ocean is about the worst PR a beach community can get, so it's in their best interest to plan accordingly," he said. "But that doesn't mean they have to violate state law to do that."

Back on Figure Eight, the one-two punch of Tropical Storm Hanna in early September and a no-name storm that followed a few weeks later has exacerbated the erosion woes.

In several places sandbags have been overwashed, and scouring behind other bags is eating into the escarpment and exposing the foundation pilings of homes.

Island officials plan to place sand on the beach this winter as part of maintenance dredging of nearby waterways. But if recent history is any guide, the sand won't stick around very long.

For a longer-term solution, Figure Eight would like to shift the main channel in nearby Rich Inlet to allow sand to start collecting on the north end's inlet-influenced beach.

But the proposed project is still a long way from winning regulatory approval.

Hobbs said he thinks the island's homeowners should be allowed to keep their bags until that project comes along. "Who are we hurting if we do?" he said. "More importantly, what other option do we have?"

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