

Base NC's coastal protection on science, not monied interests

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If the North Carolina Senate has its way, decades of sound coastal management will be sacrificed to benefit owners of exclusive beachfront houses, most of which are investment properties or second homes.

The integrity of the beaches that belong to all North Carolinians will be forever undermined if the House passes two bills approved by the Senate in recent weeks.

We urge mountain lawmakers to stand up against the wealthy interests that would undermine North Carolina's beautiful coastline and vote no on the two bills, which moved to the House earlier this month.

One would allow terminal groins to be built along the coast. These are hard structures that jut into the sea and interrupt the natural movement of the sandy beaches. The other would temporarily forbid the Coastal Resources Commission from enforcing state law that requires the removal of sandbags used for the same purpose.

That the state's senators gave a nod to the bills in the face of virtually unanimous opposition from coastal scientists testifies to the success of sustained lobbying efforts initiated several years ago by a group of wealthy, well-connected Figure Eight Island property owners. Leaders in some coastal communities also support the bills out of concern for what will happen if expensive beachfront houses in their communities must be moved or torn down.

A number, though not all, of Figure Eight Island owners want to build a terminal groin to try to stop erosion on the north end of the island where several expensive homes are threatened. The Coastal Resources Commission banned groins, jetties and other erosion control structures beginning in 1985. In 2003, the legislature unanimously voted the ban into law.

It's a law that recognizes the reality that some forces of nature are too powerful and too complex for human beings to control without unintended and sometimes dire consequences.

Thanks to those lawmakers' foresight, the sand along North Carolina's coast migrates as nature intended and the state has been spared endless lawsuits over whose groin is causing erosion on whose beach, something Rob Young, director of the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines at Western Carolina University, calls coastal management by the courts.

Young ought to know. He's also a licensed coastal geologist in Florida, a state that allows groins and other erosion control structures.

"The state is awash in coastal lawsuits, neighbor suing neighbor, community suing community," Young said last week. "If we start putting structures on the coast that interrupt how sand moves about, we're going to have that in North Carolina."

In the communities they've examined, Young said, more than 95 percent of the threatened houses are investment property or second homes.

The Figure Eight Island homeowners are among the state's most prominent citizens and prolific political contributors, according to Democracy North Carolina's Bob Hall. The 150 donors to the Island Preservation Society PAC they established, and their family members, donated more than

\$1.25 million to state-level politics from November 2003 to April 2008. The top recipients were State Sen. President Pro Tem Marc Basnight, who received \$186,548, and Gov. Beverly Perdue, who got \$147,183.

North Carolina's constitution protects the state's wetlands, estuaries and beaches as part of its citizens' common heritage.

"Any coastal structure designed to trap or hold sand in one location will, without question, deprive another area of that sand," according to a statement from N.C. coastal scientists arguing against any change in the ban on groins and other hard structures.

In other words, downdrift beaches will be destroyed.

Is it right to destroy the magnificent beaches that belong to all North Carolinians to protect the investments of a few wealthy and prominent people, some of whom don't even live in the state? North Carolina's beaches are one of the state's most treasured and well-preserved resources. We're counting on members of the House to defeat these two self-serving bills and see that it stays that way.