

North Carolina's Coastal Chaos

Increasingly, North Carolina is in a political turmoil over how to handle its beach erosion problems. And, as always, beachfront property owners are in the center of the turmoil because it is their buildings that are being threatened. It is important to note that it is their buildings that also create the problem: no buildings next to the beach, no erosion problem. Natural beaches never need salvation.

The beach nourishment juggernaut is roaring out of control and the rush is on to nourish North Carolina's beaches. If Senator Marc Basnight has his way, the rush won't stop until every developed beach in the state is nourished. But the cost is very high. A recently approved Outer Banks beach nourishment project is estimated to cost \$1.8 billion over 50 years for only 14 miles of beach. That's a subsidy of more than \$30,000 per oceanfront house each year for 50 years. Ironically, the US Army Corps of Engineers' own numbers show that, in the long run, it would be cheaper to buy and remove these Outer Banks beachfront properties than to continue to nourish the beach every three years as planned.

There are other problems with beach nourishment in North Carolina. The US Department of Agriculture, for example, recently decided to loan Indian Beach and Pine Knoll Shores almost \$12 million – nearly half of a special hurricane disaster relief fund allocated to NC - to nourish their beaches. While these communities defend this deal, the truth is that dozens of rural communities devastated by the 1999 hurricanes will now be deprived of the chance to rebuild damaged libraries, schools and other essential community facilities. And, in spite of the fact that Federal money is involved, the nourished beach serves no public need since the public will be unable to access it.

Another problem of note is the so-called sea turtle habitat restoration project on Oak Island, the first beach anywhere nourished by the US Army Corps of Engineers under the category "habitat restoration." Because of a lack of supervision by the Corps, dredge operators spewed large quantities of rock, both large and small, on the beach, making Oak Island the worst quality beach in the history of NC beach nourishment projects. If nourished beaches weren't so very political; the money spent on Oak Island would instead be spent on Florida beaches, where thousands, instead of about a hundred, turtles nest each year. We doubt if many in Oak Island were as concerned with "restoring habitat" as they were with getting an essentially free beach nourishment project to save what houses Hurricane Floyd had spared.

Beach nourishment proponents are now proposing that there is a linkage between shoreline retreat and NC mountain air pollution. The air quality situation in NC's mountains is, indeed, a serious environmental problem. Shoreline retreat, on the other hand, is a natural phenomenon in response to sea level rise, and is only a problem for a small number of beachfront property owners. The problems caused by shoreline retreat can be solved at much lower cost to taxpayers by moving buildings. Trying to gain legitimacy for beach nourishment by attaching it to a real environmental problem is disingenuous.

The flames are being fueled by a recent state legislative research commission that focused exclusively on protecting beachfront property rather than on the concerns and interests of the state citizenry as a whole. The commission was so biased that its final report on beach nourishment was virtually unacceptable in terms of cost estimates and its failure to consider environmental problems. Most importantly, it took a very short range view of a long-term problem. Legislation based on the work of this flawed commission is in the hopper.

It has become apparent, looking at other parts of the country, that beach nourishment is not only costly, but that it leads to increased density of development. Down the road, in a generation or three, we can anticipate that NC beaches will be lined with sea walls, high rises, degraded beaches and more people and property will be in danger than ever before. All this after the expenditure of many millions of taxpayer dollars.

What we need is a long-term look at the future of North Carolina's beaches by an objective body. Meanwhile, we should require public access on all nourished beaches that are publicly funded and require density restrictions and zoning on such beaches.

Beach nourishment is nothing more than a way to save the homes of the wealthy that were stupid enough to build along an eroding shoreline.

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