

THE END IS NEAR

(Proposed op-ed submitted to the Greensboro News & Record)

By Orrin H. Pilkey

The decline of the old Outer Banks towns, Nags Head, Kill Devil and Kitty Hawk, is just around the corner.

Today the Outer Banks can be reached from Raleigh on a smooth, new four-lane road hindered by few stoplights. Helped along by the soon-to-be-built new Currituck Bridge for the benefit of the crowds from Virginia, it has never been easier to get to the Outer Banks.

As has occurred elsewhere however, improved access designed to relieve massive summertime congestion may only increase such traffic.

Gridlock is already here in the summer months. Getting to the restaurant for a night out in July can be a long and excruciating experience.

What makes the three Outer Banks towns particularly susceptible to gridlock (relative to other North Carolina beach towns) is the lack of an important commercial center on the mainland to relieve the pressure. There are no equivalents to Morehead City on the mainland behind Bogue Banks and Wilmington behind Wrightsville and Carolina Beaches.

Meanwhile the shoreline is retreating and the sea level is rising. Due to global warming, storms are expected to be even larger and to occur more frequently in the future. Already the waves here are among the largest and the storms are among the most frequent on the US East Coast.

The second major difference between Outer Banks beaches and those to the south is related to these high beach-eroding waves.

The US Army Corps of Engineers estimates that the cost of pumping sand on only 14 miles of beach to be 1.6 billion dollars over 50 years. This price tag is much higher than projections for North Carolina beaches further south.

In fact, if the Corps' projections were close to the truth, keeping sand on these beaches for 50 years would be the most costly dredge-and-fill project in the nation's history.

Where's that money going to come from? All indications are that the federal government will soon stop funding new artificial beaches.

Numerous Outer Banks buildings have fallen in to the sea over past decades. In an example of perverse and irresponsible priorities, some debris from lost houses remains on the beaches. There are sand bag fragments, pipes and electric lines sticking out of the sand and chunks of concrete on the beach

Last weekend a student on a class field trip of mine injured his foot on a submerged piece of concrete off South Nags Head. The injury could have been much more serious to a body surfer. Since cleaning the beaches seems to be a low priority here, the beaches will become more dangerous with time and more lost buildings.

In some locations the beach is entirely missing at mid to high tide levels because sandbag seawalls built on the beach to protect buildings are now virtually standing on the beach. Some of these “temporary” sandbag structures have been in place for nearly two decades and one of them is 2000 feet long.

At the moment, the Outer Banks are viewed as a highly desirable location to build multi-family, multi-floor, mini hotels that replace mom and pop cottages next to the beach. Profit is the goal and these bigger buildings make bigger profits. The few vacant beachfront lots now go for up to \$2 million. And of course, as larger and larger buildings crowd the beachfront, the shoreline keeps on moving toward the buildings.

The vast majority of property owners don't live on the Outer Banks year round and have no vote in the future of their communities. Development of the Outer Banks seems to be in the hands of local people largely motivated by profit.

The end is near. As beaches degrade, as traffic snarls and storms leave their mark, the economic and environmental decline of the three Outer Banks towns is as certain as their beautiful Atlantic sunrises.

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