

Editorial - Don't damage beaches

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Lawmakers in a hurry to erode North Carolina's seawall ban need to remember one thing: The beaches belong to the public, not to private property owners. Any effort to control erosion that will restrict public access or shift erosion from one part of the beach to another is bad policy.

The push to allow sand-catching "terminal groins" at all inlets comes from beach towns and property owners whose homes or businesses are threatened by the rapid movement of inlets. Senate Bill 110, sponsored by Republican state Sens. Thom Goolsby (New Hanover County), Bill Rabon (Brunswick), and Harry Brown (Onslow), the majority leader, would go beyond previous attempts to allow limited experiments with hardened structures.

Nor does the bill specifically exempt such projects from public funding, as some past bills have done. These structures could be tried if no "practical" options remain, and that includes moving structures. The definition of "practical" will be key in the debate over this bill.

Any exemption to the state's long-standing ban on seawalls and other permanent structures, including groins, should be limited to the rare exception. If it becomes the rule, the pressure to allow more exceptions will become even greater.

The issue boils down to the question of who owns the beach, and how much should be done to protect the interests of private owners who built or bought homes on unstable barrier islands – especially near inlets, whose powerful flow can eat away sand at an alarming rate. In just a few years an ample stretch of sand at the tip of a barrier island can erode to within inches of structures that once seemed a safe distance from the water.

Scientists have been preaching for decades the folly of allowing construction so close to an unrelenting sea and changeable inlets. But beach towns eager for revenue, property owners eager to build and developers eager to accommodate them ignored warnings to increase setbacks and to restrict construction near constantly shifting inlets. In many cases they fought efforts to impose tougher development rules.

The result is that we now have \$7.7 billion in property along the coast, much of it in jeopardy from a strong hurricane or aggressive erosion. That is an enormous investment, and property owners as well as beach towns stand to lose a lot. Beachfront rentals generate tourist revenue for our local businesses and help keep property taxes low. The impact can't be ignored.

But just how much is there to gain by allowing the low-profile barriers, aside from the impact on individual property owners? The News & Observer of Raleigh, quoting a Western Carolina University study, reported Sunday that terminal groins at all 10 erosion-affected inlets would save \$18 million in property tax revenue over 30 years. That's about \$600,000 a year. But it could cost three times that over the same timeframe to build and maintain even one.

It matters who pays that cost – the property owners or the taxpayers. And our lawmakers must understand that their job is to protect the interests of the public as a whole. That includes recognizing that our beaches belong to all of us, not only the fortunate few. They must remain accessible, and any efforts to hold off the advancing sea must benefit the public as a whole. As written, this bill does not meet that standard.