

Bill for sand-trapping groins passes Senate, gets stuck in House

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Coastal N.C.

Inlet sand-trapper bill seems to be stuck again

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The regulatory wall against hardened structures along the state's coastline appears to have held, at least through another legislative session.

Although there's been no final decision on whether the terminal groin bill will be heard before the General Assembly recesses, time is running out in Raleigh.

But there's growing political and public pressure on the state's long-standing ban on hardened structures, and proponents of softening the rule to allow terminal groins in specific situations have promised to keep chipping away.

"We will not give up," said Caswell Beach Mayor Harry Simmons, who also is executive director of the N.C. Beach, Inlet and Waterway Association. "We're in this thing for the long haul."

Ramping up their efforts, proponents of terminal groins formed a coast-wide coalition this year to press their case about the need for realistic options beyond temporary sandbags, expensive beach nourishment projects and relocating threatened structures.

They aggressively pushed the difference between traditional sea walls, which are almost universally disliked, and terminal groins. Unlike other oceanfront barriers, terminal groins are low-slung, perpendicular structures that allow sand to pass over them once they're covered. They also would only be allowed at the ends of islands to help stabilize these inherently volatile beach areas.

The legislation, as in past years, breezed through the Senate.

But in the state House, it's run into an object just as solid as any hardened structure - Speaker Joe Hackney.

Without the speaker's support, the bill will remain bottled up in committee and not brought forward for a vote.

Hackney spokesman Bill Holmes on Tuesday said no final decision had been made yet on the bill's fate.

But proponents and opponents both feel the legislation will remain sandbagged until next year's short legislative session at the earliest.

That's just fine with environmentalists, researchers and others - including the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources - who fear that North Carolina's beachfront could soon look like New Jersey's if the ban is weakened.

Andy Coburn, associate director of the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines at Western Carolina University, said the slippery-slope threat is a real worry, since groins by definition trap sand that's meant for another section of beach.

"There's no doubt that's a primary concern that when the door is cracked open, the floodgates are open," he said. "It's almost guaranteed to happen."

Supporters of terminal groins dispute that, noting that the proposed bill severely limits where the terminal groins would be built and would require them to pass regulatory and environmental muster with the N.C. Coastal Resources Commission.

Proponents also claim a terminal groin makes better long-term economic sense than pumping sand that just washes away, especially in highly dynamic areas like those around inlets.

Ocean Isle Beach Mayor Debbie Smith estimates that since the mid-1990s, the severe erosion on the east end of her island has cost the Brunswick County town more than \$60 million in lost tax revenue and expenditures for pumping sand and protecting and moving threatened infrastructure.

Yet today, a thin line of fabric bags - and little beach - is the only thing separating the encroaching Atlantic and dozens of oceanfront homes. And we're heading into the teeth of the 2009 hurricane season.

"Some of us are running out of time," Smith said. "The more we delay, the more lost infrastructure we're going to have and the more potentially we're going to have to spend on temporary protection measures.

"So it's time for a decision. We've talked about this for a long time."

But for opponents, the cost of allowing any new structures along the coast is too high.

"This has been a good law for North Carolina," Coburn said. "So why should we change it there's really no evidence that these things work?"