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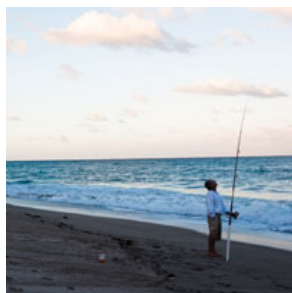


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### Singer Island erosion is 'a political shovefest'

STORY BY LEE HINNANT - WEEK OF DECEMBER 9, 2010

When it comes to saving the sliver of strand along the north stretch of Singer Island, Palm Beach County officials are between a rock and a soft place, and that soft place is literally slipping away underfoot.

The condominium-lined stretch of beach between county-owned Ocean Reef Park and MacArthur State Park is narrow and getting smaller. Palm Beach County has built up and planted dunes and worked on a longer-lasting solution for more than a decade, and its efforts intensified after the storms of 2004 and 2006.

The county's plan to install 11 piles of limestone and granite boulders 270 feet offshore is in its third go-around with state and federal regulators, who object on a wide variety of grounds. A coalition of environmental groups, led by the Surfrider Foundation, flatly opposes such hard structures, in part because they might open the floodgates for similar projects, generally frowned upon under state law.

Because much of the seabed is hard rock, the county can't drastically change the habitat and simply dump sand offshore. Similarly, without some protection from waves, continuing to build up the dunes "means washing money away," said Palm Beach County Commission Chairman Karen Marcus, who represents the Northern Palm Beaches.

"This is just a really challenging project," Marcus said.

Ericka D'Avanzo, regional director for Surfrider, calls the controversy "a political shovefest" focusing on a small stretch of beach that ignores the larger issues. The county's plans for piles of rubble that would remain two feet underwater will cost at least \$30 million but will reduce total wave energy by only 10 percent – a number a county official confirmed.

Further, D'Avanzo contends the breakwaters would reduce the natural flow of sand to the south, harming the city beach at Ocean Reef and points south to Lake Worth Inlet. It would also threaten boaters, swimmers, surfers and protected sea turtles and manatees, she said.

"If they put the mounds down in there, the county is just going to have to remove them and mitigate for the (environmental) damages," D'Avanzo said. "Our experts say this isn't going to work and it's a waste of money...We want a sustainable solution."

Part of the problem has been modifications done to appease federal and state regulators, said Robert Robbins, deputy director of the county's Department of Environmental Management. Earlier versions of the breakwaters – rejected by the

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Army Corps of Engineers – called for rubble piles extending well above the waves.

Corps officials stated those plans posed “unacceptable risk” of harming beaches to the south and raised “serious concerns about the impacts” on sea turtles.

“I’m not an engineer but something has to be done or we’re going to lose our beach,” said Marianne Wilkinson, who has property at Oasis and Sea Winds. The ocean already laps the stairs to the pool at one property. The beach at Sea Winds is 60 to 70 feet narrower than it used to be, a problem exacerbated by the fact that an adjoining property has a seawall, while Sea Winds does not.

“They’ve been good neighbors, but that’s what happens when you only put up one seawall,” Wilkinson said. “It’s serious business. I want something to happen because it’s not my beach. The beach belongs to everybody and everybody uses it.”

Commissioner Marcus admitted the project might be imperfect, but said the cost of doing nothing could well be construction of additional seawalls, and some condos already have permits to build those seawalls.

“We’ve asked them not to build,” Marcus said. “If we don’t get a project approved, you’ll have more seawalls... Then there is now here for the sea turtles to nest.”

The state Water Resources Management Division recently issued a draft permit for the most recent breakwater design, but Robbins said the conditions are so numerous and cumbersome that they may make the project untenable.

The reviews required include a fresh look by the state Fish and Wildlife Commission, and officials don’t know how long that might take. Also, the state wants the county to determine how much it would cost to remove the breakwaters and put the money or a bond up front, Robbins said. “That’s a very significant cost.”

The county would have to build a 1.75-acre artificial reef about a mile south to mitigate the loss of bottom habitat. Environmental monitoring would have to continue for five years and if anything went significantly wrong, the breakwaters would have to come up.

One novel part of the monitoring calls for biologists to affix tiny lights to turtle hatchlings. If the hatchlings make it past the breakwater, other biologists in kayaks would remove the lights and return them to the ocean. If the lights go dim, scientists will assume the tiny turtles were eaten by predators.

“We’re in uncharted water,” Marcus said. “We’ve done just about everything possible.”

D’Avanzo – whose earlier objections were endorsed by Florida Wildlife Federation, Defenders of Wildlife and Sea Turtle Conservancy – suggested that a couple of things needed to change.

First, residents need to accept that a narrow strand is a natural consequence. “If folks think they are going to have a big wide beach like Miami Beach, that’s just not reality,” D’Avanzo said. The other idea is to look at the entire system between Jupiter Inlet and Lake Worth Inlet.

A hard structure protecting one small stretch of beach will only prompt increased erosion elsewhere, D’Avanzo said. “You’re robbing Peter to pay Paul, only to have the consultants do another project in the future,” she said.

Continued building of the dunes, studying the inlet systems and bringing all the stakeholders into the picture is a better plan, she said.

“It’s a hot-button issue,” said Harry Simmons, president of the American Beach and Shore Preservation Association. Simmons said he had no specific knowledge of the Singer Island proposal, but that the best approach was to make sure any project does not harm someplace else. “In the broadest sense, regionalism helps you avoid problems.”

Palm Beach County and most of Florida has not approached the problem in this manner, in part because there has been sufficient money for isolated projects, D’Avanzo said. Marcus said she is willing to listen to anyone who has a better idea.

Meanwhile, the money may be drying up. There’s only enough money budgeted to rebuild the dunes this winter, Robbins said.

As the funds are ebbing, the sea keeps flow ing. And the strand keeps w ashing  
aw ay.