

Palm Beach County hopes low-profile breakwaters will ease turtle advocates' objections to Singer Island beach plan

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Palm Beach County is proposing a new, lower-profile design for a controversial breakwater project on Singer Island - one that officials hope will be scaled-back enough to win permits while still stabilizing the condo-lined beach.

The difference: Instead of sticking 1 to 3 feet out of the water, as the county earlier proposed, the new design will lie 2 feet below the surface at low tide.

The mile-long string of 11 limestone structures, dubbed the Singer Island Erosion Control Reef System, is intended to dissipate wave energy and reduce beach erosion, much like a natural reef would.

If state and federal regulators allow the \$30 million reef system to be built, the state would pay 40 percent of the cost. The county would pay 40 percent, and Riviera Beach would pay the rest.

The county was unable to obtain permits for the old breakwater design after four years of trying, largely because of concerns about federally protected sea turtles on an active nesting beach.

Regulators feared that mother turtles, forced between gaps in the breakwater structures, would compete for nesting space on smaller sections of beach. They were also concerned that hatchlings headed to the ocean would be distracted or ambushed by predators near the breakwaters.

"The fact that the segments are submerged eliminates many of the environmental concerns that were raised with the former emergent design," said Michael Stahl, project manager for the county's Department of Environmental Resources Management. "Nesting turtles' access to the beach and hatchling access to the water will not be restricted."

Stahl said the beach dune still would need to be replenished with sand brought in by truck if the submerged system of wave-breaking structures is built. He said the erosion-control system, similar to one installed off Sunny Isles Beach in Miami-Dade County, is much better than the likely alternative: sea walls.

The Surfrider Foundation disagrees.

"This is a bad project," said Greg Lyon, chairman of the Palm Beach County chapter of the nonprofit environmental group. "It's poorly engineered and improperly modeled."

Lyon contends building the structures would cause the beach to the south to become more eroded. He says it also would create a navigation hazard and damage natural hard bottom, important fish habitat.

State and federal agencies also have questioned the modified design's impact on sea turtles and hard bottom.

In a recent letter to permit reviewers at the state's Bureau of Beaches and Coastal Systems, the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission said the structures "would have both temporary and permanent adverse effects on the existing hard bottom."

Even though turtles could pass over submerged structures, the wildlife commission notes, fish hiding around the structures would continue to prey on turtle hatchlings, and baby turtles headed into the ocean still could be

disoriented by the disruption of waves.

Stahl contends that the structures would have no direct impact on "persistently exposed" hard bottom - hard bottom that remains exposed for three years or more - and that the limestone structures would create 11 acres of habitat that would harbor marine invertebrates.

With the wave-breaking structures in place, Stahl said, the beach would remain wider instead of being eroded, giving sea turtles a place to nest.

"If the focus of concern is on sea turtles, at least we're doing something to preserve the habitat," he said.

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