

## Palm Beach County to decide whether sea turtle threat should scrap beach-erosion-fighting breakwaters

*Environmental groups oppose building wave-buffering rock walls off coastline*

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Tourism and sea turtles could be on a collision course again as Palm Beach County officials decide whether to build rock walls off the coast to guard against beach erosion.

A long-planned proposal is resurfacing to build breakwaters that jut out of the ocean, positioned about 300 feet away from erosion-plagued beaches.

The breakwaters would help lessen erosion by taking the brunt of the impact from ocean waves, reducing the amount of sand that washes away.

But the rock mounds also could get in the way of endangered sea turtles coming on shore to lay eggs, as well as hatchlings trying to make their way into the ocean.

Environmental groups oppose the breakwaters. State and federal regulators in the past have balked at Palm Beach County's proposal.

Yet with erosion eating away at the shoreline – threatening condominiums and hotels and hurting Florida's main tourist attraction – Palm Beach County is weighing whether to make a new push for breakwaters.

The county's Environmental Resources Management Department is readying a review of the impacts of breakwaters to go before the County Commission in March.

Past plans were for the breakwaters to start on Singer Island, in a \$30 million project that would be paid for by the county, Riviera Beach and the state. That cost includes pumping more sand onto the beaches once the breakwaters are completed.

Another \$20 million proposal would stretch breakwaters from Palm Beach to Manalapan and Lantana. If successful, breakwaters or other erosion-control structures could move farther south.

"We don't have a lot of choices," said Commission Chairwoman Karen Marcus, who has long pushed to beef up Singer Island beaches. "Breakwaters can be moved and adjusted if problems come up."

Environmental groups warn that the breakwaters would do too much harm to sea turtles. They say the structures could end up robbing beaches to the south of sand by blocking the normal north-to-south sand drift that the ocean delivers.

"There are other, less destructive options ... than putting giant football field-size piles of rock right in the middle of critical migration pathways of sea turtles," said Gary Appelson, policy director of the Sea Turtle Conservancy.

County commissioners in March will be asked to consider moving ahead with the renewed breakwater plan or starting to look for other alternatives.

"Whatever decision is reached will be a precedence for other beach areas, particularly to the south," County Administrator Robert Weisman told county commissioners in an e-mail.

The county contends that Singer Island's beaches already are too eroded to just pump more dredged sand onto the shoreline without doing something to help keep the sand from washing away again.

The plan for Singer Island calls for using 200,000 tons of stone to build 11 breakwaters, lined up parallel to shore along a stretch of eroded shoreline fronting a row of condominium towers.

The stone walls would rise about 3 feet above the surface at low tide. The line of breakwaters in this initial phase would stretch from John D. MacArthur Beach State Park to Ocean Reef Park.

Farther south, the county proposes another 1.3 miles of breakwaters and other erosion-control structures stretching from Palm Beach to the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Manalapan.

In all, breakwaters would be added to about 2 miles of the county's 46 miles of beaches.

Environmental groups argue that, in addition to threatening sea turtles, breakwaters would end up worsening beach-erosion problems elsewhere. Redistributing sand collected in manmade inlets would be the better long-term fix, according to the Surfrider Foundation, an environmental group.

Breakwaters also would create more rip currents along the shore, said Greg Lyon, chairman of the Palm Beach County chapter of the Surfrider Foundation.

"You start building breakwaters and you will have to armor the entire coast," Lyon said. "It's a waste of taxpayer money."

Tightening government budgets could make beach projects more difficult to pay for in the future.

The county already has the \$30 million in local and state funding committed for the Singer Island breakwaters, but needs federal and state environmental permits to proceed. The local money for beach-nourishment projects comes from taxes on hotel stays and is intended to help boost tourism.

"Money spent on the beach is money well spent," said Leanne Welch, who supervises beach-renourishment for the county.

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