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Eroding sand poses crisis for beaches

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TOMS RIVER

Even oceanfront property owners who are scared of losing property rights said they are ultimately in favor of seeing their beach filled with fresh sand.

"The Army Corps of Engineers is to us like motherhood. We want the project," said Victor Groisser of Harvey Cedars, one of six Long Beach Island towns where residents have been at loggerheads with state officials over proposed public access easements to the beach.

Groisser and other property owners told state senators the big problem is with the state's insistence that it get access in perpetuity. The Senate Environmental Committee hearing here Friday also featured experts who say there's no time to waste.

"Long Beach Island should be started tomorrow. That's how serious the situation is," said professor Stewart Farrell of the Coastal Research Center at Richard Stockton College, who measures and monitors beach conditions along the Garden State's 127-mile ocean coastline.

With beaches between 30 and 50 feet wide in many places and dunes that offer only "a token defense," Long Beach Island is the area most vulnerable to a major coastal storm or hurricane, Farrell told committee members.

The chairman, Sen. Robert Smith, D-Piscataway, said he scheduled the hearing at the request of his colleague, Sen. Andrew Ciesla, R-Brick.

Ciesla's northern Ocean County legislative district includes the Barnegat peninsula, another barrier beach that is the next priority for beach rebuilding, said David Rosenblatt, administrator of the Department of Environmental Protection's coastal engineering office.

"Without help from the federal government, we're probably in trouble because there's so much money involved in this," observed Dover Township Mayor Paul C. Brush, who's among a group of mayors and municipal officials who met last month to discuss how they might proceed with a 13-mile beach replenishment if the Army Corps can't come through with a \$60 million share.

Environmental activists said beach replenishment should be tied to stricter controls on development in high-hazard areas, and along the coast generally. In the past decade, nearly 20,000 acres have been built on in Monmouth and Ocean counties, contributing to polluted storm water flows into coastal waters, Doug O'Malley of the Public Interest Research Group said.

"After these projects come in, development just seems to run rampant," said John Weber, East Coast regional manager for the Surfrider Foundation. "This is a vicious cycle as we replenish, build too close to the ocean, and look the other way."

While DEP demands for public access easements are a sticking point on Long Beach Island, access is too often denied where the Army Corps refilled Monmouth County beaches in the last decade, said Thomas P. Fote, legislative chairman for the Jersey Coast Anglers Association.

"If those people want beach replenishment, they should allow public access," Fote said. "One or two years go by and the signs come back and we're denied access to those areas."

Despite all this controversy, "the program in New Jersey is the envy of other states and (Army Corps) districts in the country," said Jeff Gebert, chief of the coastal planning section at the Army Corps' Philadelphia district.

New Jersey accounts for just 3 percent of the U.S. coastline but is by far the biggest recipient of beach protection dollars, with \$180 million in federal spending over the last eight years, Gebert said. That outstripped Florida, where the feds spent \$157 million during those years, but emergency work after last year's hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico may eventually change those rankings, he said.

Out of 93 miles of developed shoreline, New Jersey has beach-widening projects in place along 51 miles, Gebert said.

Generally, those beach projects have held up to the weather, scientists Farrell and Norbert Psuty of Rutgers University said. But it will be a continuing struggle in this century with forecasted rises in sea level, they noted.

And that fight won't just be on the beaches, Psuty added.

"Can you imagine another two feet of sea level rise along our bay shore?" he said. "They won't be able to take it. There will be structural changes."

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