

## South Hutchinson Island beach renewal would benefit all

Over the past week, ballots went out in the mail to more than 3,000 owners of condominiums on South Hutchinson Island. County officials want to know if those owners are prepared to help pay their share of a \$12.5 million restoration project on 3.4 miles of beach between Normandy Beach and the Martin County line.

On average, individual owners would pay about \$1,500 a year toward the project upfront on their property tax bill. That represents about onethird of the project costs; state and county funding would make up the balance.

The beach in this area has become narrower and narrower in recent years, partly because of lack of beach renourishment projects to the north, and partly because of damage caused during the hurricanes of 2004. After storms Frances and Jeanne, several condominium buildings were in danger of being consumed by the angry Atlantic Ocean. Despite a couple of bouts of emergency sand-dumping in the aftermath, only a thin line of dunes separates the condos from the restless sea.

The project should add another 40 feet of beach, making the area about 100 feet wide and last at least a decade, the experts say. Personally, if I owned a condo there, I'd jump at the county's offer. Protect my real estate investment (condos in this strip are worth between \$300,000 and \$1 million each, a couple of residents told me) for only \$1,500 upfront, or \$225 a year for 10 years? Sounds like a bargain.

But is it such a bargain for those don't live on the beach?

Yes, according to Jim David, longtime head of the county's Mosquito Control and Coastal Management Services Department.

"If we do nothing, we get nothing," David said bluntly.

He explained how beach sand naturally moves north to south along the coast. That's especially true immediately south of the Fort Pierce Inlet. Some of that sand is then deposited on beaches north of the power plant, making them wider. That's not the case in this 3.4-mile strip; they're losing sand with every nor'easter that blows in.

David's point is that this is a dynamic process we can't stop, even with hardened structures like groins. Ifwedon't renourish on a regular basis, before long there won't be beach at all.

We're losing between 60,000 and 130,000 cubic yards of sand a year depending on location, David estimated.

"Why would that matter?"

non- beachgoers might ask.

Because ignoring the problem could have really serious economic repercussions for everyone. Those 22 condos represent a substantial amount of individual investment, which translates into sizable property tax revenue. People pay a premium to live overlooking the ocean and their tax bills reflect that.

Lose that and we'll all pay a great deal more in property taxes.

Without a beach, the public would also lose recreational amenities and we'd all lose tourism dollars. The beach, of course, also provides habitat for turtle nesting and shorebirds. And, as my wife reminds me, it's a great place for meditation. Simply put, not having a beach would seriously erode much of why we live here.

St. Lucie County is hoping the state will chip in about 40 percent of the renourishment project costs.

Then there's the federal angle. The Federal Emergency Management Administration recently has changed its rules.

In the future, FEMA will not favorably view requests for beach renourishment after a hurricane if that beach has not been regularly maintained over the previous five years. So, doing nothing now could jeopardize getting help from the fees when we really need it (again).

As long as a majority of those condo owners agree to chip in on the project, it's likely to happen. And that will be a good thing even for those (like me) who rarely go to the beach.

We've invested too much to turn back now, so I guess we better keep on truckin'.

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**Jim David,**

*head of St. Lucie County's Mosquito Control and Coastal Management Services Department*



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