

Beach money conditional on public access

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Emerald Isle asked to expand parking, pathways near shore

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EMERALD ISLE | Coastal towns that want federal money to rebuild eroding beaches are being told by the Corps of Engineers to increase the amount of public access in return for the money.

In towns like Emerald Isle, even a town official who doesn't live on the beach road risks a parking ticket under local rules if he parks on shoreside streets while inspecting the beach.

Now, the Corps' Wilmington district wants a public pathway from beach to street every half-mile and public parking spaces every quarter-mile.

"We have always assumed we had ample access, until the Corps came up with this parking requirement," said William Fugate, mayor of Indian Beach.

Mr. Fugate said a strict interpretation could threaten beach projects that will benefit thousands of visitors. Beach communities generate much of the county's \$212 million annual tourist-related revenue, he said, adding that the business is an indication that the beaches are open and accessible.

"If we didn't enable people to get to the beach, we wouldn't do \$212 million worth of business," Mr. Fugate said.

The local governments are working with Corps officials to determine exactly how many parking spaces should be provided and whether a few spacious regional parking lots would be as good as numerous small sites.

Critics say failure to provide adequate access means public money will be spent to repair what become private beaches.

Newport resident Don Morris, a retiree who comes to the beach for surf fishing, said people from all over the country pay for the beach nourishment projects through tax money, and they should be able to reach the beach anywhere.

In Emerald Isle, there is no public parking for about eight miles between the regional parking lots, and several neighborhood access spots on the west end are in private subdivisions, Mr. Morris said.

The issue surfaced in Carteret County in connection with Corps of Engineers consideration of two projects that would involve millions in federal funding.

In one, the corps is studying the feasibility of building up about 23 miles of Bogue Banks

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oceanfront from Atlantic Beach to Emerald Isle with sand pumped from offshore, and maintaining the beach with periodic pumping for 50 years. If the project is funded by Congress, work would not begin until 2008 or 2010.

In addition, the Corps is studying the possibility of depositing sand dredged from the Beaufort/Morehead City harbor to Pine Knoll Shores and Indian Beach. A decision on the extension is due soon, and work could begin next year.

Greg Rudolph, the Carteret County shore protection manager, said the cost to local government for the renourishment of all 23 miles would go from \$288,750 per mile to about \$3.3 million per mile if federal funds were not available.

He said the communities have enough parking spaces to meet the access rule but many are in regional facilities, rather than spaced every quarter mile as the Corps regulation requires.

Other beach nourishment projects that were financed by local governments without federal money were not required to meet the Corps' parking requirement, but they have also drawn criticism.

The state does not have a specific parking requirement for access areas.

Pine Knoll Shores Mayor Robert Gallo said the town now has five access sites with at least 125 parking spaces, twice what may be required by some corps estimates. Most are at one site, the former Iron Steamer Pier, and not dispersed through the town.

In Emerald Isle, town officials are looking at ways to create more parking along the 12.3 miles of oceanfront.

One option is to add parking in rights-of-way along town streets.

The town has 62 public walkways to the beach; 28 others are privately owned.

Parking is provided at two regional lots, each with about 250 spaces, and a smaller lot on a city street.