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Inlet proposal could alter setbacks

Forget the impending May deadline to remove most sandbags littering North Carolina beaches and talk about adjusting setback requirements for oceanfront property.

The biggest change facing the state's beach communities could be a proposal to dramatically expand the size of most inlet-hazard areas that could lead to more stringent setback requirements and size limits for thousands of oceanfront property owners.

Scientists have long known that land around the state's inlets reacts differently than other areas of the beachfront because of the unstable nature of the inlets themselves, which often whip back and forth unpredictably and cause erosion at much higher rates than other areas. Other inlets can move rapidly in one direction, such as Mason, New River and New Topsail inlets.

Knowing how precarious the shifting sands at the end of the barrier islands could be, regulators 25 years ago created the inlet-hazard zones to try to keep people and property out of harm's way.

But officials years ago figured out that the reach of the inlets went well beyond the knobs at the ends of barrier islands.

"If you look at problem areas along our coast from severe erosion and sandbags to threatened homes and infrastructure, you will find the vast majority are associated with inlets," said Courtney Hackney, chairman of the N.C. Coastal Resources Commission and a biologist at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. "But what we hadn't been able to do until recently is get the science to the point where we were comfortable defining those new inlet-hazard zones."

Effects on property

Widening the swath of territory included in the zones, however, could see thousands of oceanfront property owners potentially facing tougher building size limits and setback requirements than other beachfront areas.

For example, the draft map for Caswell Beach expands the inlet-hazard zone from just the eastern tip of the town, near the Baptist Assembly, to oceanfront properties extending to the Brunswick Nuclear Plant's cooling canal - a distance of nearly two miles.

The zones for Bald Head Island and around Shallotte, Lockwood Folly, Rich and New River inlets also are significantly expanded. And on some islands, the new zones extend several rows inland from the oceanfront.

Because most of the state's developed barrier islands are almost completely built out, this could significantly affect an owner's redevelopment opportunities if a house is burned down or destroyed by a hurricane.

Officials also have hinted that the size of the inlet-hazard zones won't be the only things likely to change.

"Obviously inlets are the most dynamic parts of our coasts, and that's where our sandbags are in most cases," said Jeff Warren, coastal hazards specialist with the N.C. Division of Coastal Management. "So that's why we want to use an innovative approach to see if what we need are rules and regulations that are different than what's been done in the past."

That could mean, for example, new ways of determining setback requirements to better reflect the instability inherent to inlet-affected areas.

"Frankly, historical erosion rates don't work around inlets because inlets are much more difficult to deal with than run-of-the-mill erosion problems," said Spencer Rogers, a coastal engineering expert with N.C. Sea Grant and a member of the CRC's Science Panel, which created the draft maps.

Cause for concern?

The distance homes in inlet-hazard zones now have to be built back from the first line of stable vegetation is based on the erosion rates in adjacent beachfront areas.

But state officials cautioned that any rule changes, like map changes, were months and plenty of public hearings away from being put into practice.

The draft maps and what they could eventually mean for development, however, have already generated concern from some local beach officials.

Caswell Beach Mayor Harry Simmons, who also is executive director of the N.C. Beach, Inlet and Waterway Association, said placing additional restrictions on huge swaths of oceanfront property could have significant economic and development ramifications.

"I certainly think that if the Coastal Resources Commission doesn't adjust the rules as relates to inlet-hazard zones, it's going to cause some real problems for some coastal communities," he said.

Warren said state officials understood that people might be concerned about what the building restrictions may be inside the new inlet-hazard zones.

"But I don't think anyone could argue that the boundaries shouldn't change," he said.

Rogers added that the new maps also could give communities a better feel on whether it makes sense to pump sand onto beaches where the material has potentially little chance of staying put for very long.

Ocean Isle Beach knows firsthand the struggle of trying to keep sand on an inlet-influenced stretch of beach.

The Brunswick County community last winter piggybacked on a larger federal beach project for the town-funded nourishment of the east end, which has suffered severe erosion tied to Shallotte Inlet.

Today, most of that sand has washed away, and the homeowners are back to relying on sandbags to hold back the Atlantic.

Mayor Debbie Smith said Ocean Isle has no immediate plans to pump more material onto the eroded area.

"We are hoping the General Assembly might give us other options, such as groins, to offer those areas some long-term protection," she said.

The proposed expanded inlet-hazard zone for the Ocean Isle Beach side of Shallotte Inlet would include all of the town's beachfront now experiencing erosion woes.

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