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Waves taking big toll on IOP Residents form company to seek permit to renourish

BY JILL COLEY

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ISLE OF PALMS - John O'Hare bought a condominium at Seascapes Villas in Wild Dunes for its tranquil ocean view. Now, the ocean keeps him awake at night as it laps ever closer to his building.

About 60 feet of public beach along the northern tip of the Isle of Palms was lost between May and October, engineers say. The erosion threatens six condominiums, several single-family homes and the 18th hole of The Links golf course.

The erosion worsened in the last month, O'Hare said, when a storm brought 9-foot tides. He watched chunks of land fall into the ocean. The stairs from Port O'Call Villas are gone, and the drop from some porches is 10 feet or more, he said.

In a place where thousands flock to short-term rentals, gently sloping beaches are critical to the island's tourism-driven economy. Talk of erosion can spell lost revenue for the resort city. But some property owners say ignoring the problem won't make it go away. The time to act is now, before the next wave of tourists arrives.

Condo owners from Ocean Club, Seascapes, Port O'Call, Tidewater, Summer House and Shipwatch villas and twohomes on Summer Dunes Lane have created a limited liability company to seek a permit to carry out a nourishment project.

The property owners' company, Isle of Palms North Beach Owners, wants to harvest about 180,000 cubic yards of sand from the Cedar Creek spit, also known as the Morgan Creek spit, and truck it along the shore to the affected beach.

While the cost of dredging can vary, a median estimate of \$7 per cubic yard would put the project at \$1.26 million, said Ed Cox of Dirt Cheap. The property owners would pay for the project.

The most expensive condos in the company sell for between \$650,000 to \$750,000, said Sandy Stone, president of the Charleston Trident Association of Realtors and owner of Keller Williams Island Realty on the Isle of Palms.

"It's unfortunate that it's come to this," O'Hare said. "I worry about what it will do to the tourism." A lot of people don't want to talk about erosion for that reason, he said.

Engineer Chris Mack with Applied Technologies Management filed permit applications Nov. 1 on behalf of the owners' company with the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Although the newly formed company is the applicant, the Wild Dunes Community Association paid for the development of the permit application. The association decided the short-term solution should be spearheaded by the beachfront property owners, said Dave Kynoski, the association's general manager.

Terri Haack, regional vice president and managing director of Wild Dunes Resort, said the resort is working with property owners to obtain the permit and do the work. Although the logistics of joining the limited liability company may prove too complex, the resort will pay its share, Haack said.

Efforts to save the beach began in fall 2005, when property owners saw major scarping. In August 2005, DHEC's Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management issued an emergency order for minor nourishment and sand scraping.

Workers began scraping sand along the beach of The Links' 18th green and packed sand around the embankment. Contractors transported sand from Mount Pleasant and filled sand bags to protect the condominiums. An uninterrupted series of emergency orders succeeded that initial order, the most recent of which is to expire Jan. 31.

This is not the first time northern beaches have been under siege. Sand erosion and accretion occurs in cycles, Mack said. A similar low point occurred in the mid-1990s, when 350 feet of shoreline was lost.

Sand washes into the inlet from Dewees Island and forms sand shoals. Those shoals then drift toward Isle of Palms beaches, where tides breaking around the shoal form an outcropping of sand on the beach, called a "tombolo."

In time, the shoal attaches to the tombolo and nourishes the beach naturally. Mack said relief should come in another year or two. Until then, the beach along the northern end of the island remains in a period of erosion. The nourishment from Cedar Creek spit should hold the shoreline until the pendulum swings to accretion, he said.

Orrin Pilkey, a geology professor at Duke University and an expert on the coastal geology of barrier islands, is pleased the parties are not considering hard structures such as sea walls and groins.

"A small amount of nourishment when there is a chance it will turn around, naturally, I'd allow that to hold the line," Pilkey said. "But if I was king, we'd move the buildings or demolish them."

What distresses Pilkey most, though, are efforts to preserve the golf course. "If we're going to worry about golf carts and sprinkler systems, we have a problem," he said.

Scraping is a form of erosion, which is more damaging than nourishment, he said. Disturbing the sand disrupts the ecosystem, he said. Birds, fish, crabs and micro-organisms disappear for a while.

William Sheppard is president of the homeowners' association for Ocean Point, the Wild Dunes neighborhood that faces the beach that has been scraped. The 18th green separates Ocean Point from the beach.

"What it boils down to is that there's 150 yards they're trying to protect, but at what cost?" he asked, referring to the 18th hole. Sheppard is worried about the nourishment project proposed by

Isle of Palms North Beach Owners, which will require about 15,000 truckloads of sand to traverse the beach in front of Ocean Point homes.

O'Hare said he understands his neighbors' concerns. "But we have a baby to protect," he said. "The economy of the island and the value of all our homes is affected by what's going on. Kiawah's gone through it. Debidue's gone through it. Seabrook did it. Now it's our turn to get together and answer the call."

Although immediate relief may sustain the beach until the shoal attaches, the long term promises another period of erosion. Mack conducted a study of the beaches along the northern stretch of the island for the Wild Dunes Community Association and found that although the process of erosion and accretion is cyclical, the northern beach near the inlet suffers a net loss of sand because of natural drift.

This makes a long-term project, such as nourishment from an offshore source of sand, necessary, Mack said. The Wild Dunes Community Association has commissioned Mack to study future sources.

The Isle of Palms City Council also is looking into long-term answers. The council has approved \$46,000 for a beach nourishment and management plan.

Mayor Mike Sottile said, "We're trying to help those folks. The rest of the island is accreting. This one area is where the problems are."

The city drafted a letter of support for the Isle of Palms North Beach Owners' short-term plan to haul sediment from Cedar Creek spit, but as a result of legal advice declined to be a permit applicant.

Haack of Wild Dunes said she is pleased with the cooperation of all involved. "It's a broad, far-reaching issue for our community and Isle of Palms," she said. "And it's an issue we need to deal with."

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