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## Beach Advisory Committee Making Significant Progress

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Blair Shiver

The St. Joseph Peninsula Beach Advisory Committee did not need an extensive engineering study to tell them their beaches are in danger.

"You can go out there and see that for yourself," said Mike Dombrowski of MRD Associates, Inc.

Speaking to the mixed crowd of property owners and stakeholders that make up the advisory committee during their regular monthly meeting, Dombrowski presented his company's findings concerning erosion patterns on Cape San Blas.

Dombrowski's feasibility study, which spanned the course of several months, was a key element for the committee to move forward in pursuit of funds for a beach restoration project.

As with most large-scale projects, the funding will be one of the most significant undertakings the group will face.

This restoration project will carry a minimum \$10.5 million price tag, though it will likely exceed that, according to Dombrowski.

The hefty price tag has placed a sense of urgency on the committee to establish a funding stream as soon as possible.

After discussion of several funding possibilities, county attorney Tim McFarland told the committee in their September meeting that a municipal services taxing unit, or MSTU, would be the county's preferred option for this particular project.

McFarland has since enlisted the assistance of Sara Bleckley, a tax attorney from Tallahassee, who spoke briefly to the committee on Friday.

"We obviously have time crunch issues," McFarland explained. "We have a lot to do and a little bit of time to do it. If we want to begin collecting this tax next year, we have to put it in place by December 2005."

In the September 27 county commission meeting, McFarland received approval from the board to move forward with the process of establishing an MSTU – specifically, the drafting of an ordinance on which those in the affected area would vote in a special election.

An MSTU is a taxing district authorized by state statutes for providing for specific services and/or improvements to a defined geographical area. For this restoration, that area is the Gulf-front stretch from the Stump Hole to the St. Joseph Peninsula State Park.

Bleckley told the committee that nearly a quarter of the county's taxable property value was currently on the Cape. She further explained that, based on her preliminary assessments, the MSTU would need to levy approximately two mills to make the necessary contribution to the overall cost.

The downside of the MSTU, she explained, is that ad valorem taxes cannot legally be pledged to pay off outstanding debt.

Speaking on behalf of the committee, co-chairman Charlie Weston told Bleckley, "The MSTU is what we want."

Bleckley, also a shareholder in a home on Cape San Blas, will draft the ordinance for the committee to submit to the county commission for approval before it is voted on by property owners.

Another major funding source may be the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

Pending satisfaction of several ranking criteria by the committee, DEP may be able to foot up to 50 percent of the cost of the project.

One of those criteria was Dombrowski's coastal analysis, which classified the beach erosion's severity and threat to development.

Phil Flood, beach project manager with DEP, said he was impressed with how quickly the St. Joseph Peninsula Beach Advisory Committee has taken shape and made tangible progress.

Another criterion for DEP funding is the qualification of the recreational and economic benefits of the beach.

This study is still in progress by Dr. Bill Stronge, an economics professor at Florida Atlantic University.

Weston suggested at the conclusion of Dombrowski's presentation that his information be merged with Stronge's at the conclusion of both studies.

As the restoration project builds momentum, the public relations and marketing committee has developed a logo and marketing plan to use in the public information campaign.

Though still a work in progress, the committee has developed a website to provide updates on the project's progress. To learn more about the beach restoration project, visit [www.savethecape.com](http://www.savethecape.com).

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