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## What Is Beach Restoration And Why We Are Talking About It In Gulf County

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By now you've heard the buzz around town or have seen the posters: "Visit [www.savethecape.com](http://www.savethecape.com)." You may be asking yourself, "save the Cape from what?"

Hopefully, this short story will bring Gulf County residents and visitors up to date on an issue that should concern us all. Like so many other areas in Florida, a section of our precious beach is eroding. In the past year, the county and state have begun exploring ways to reverse this trend in the proposed project area – generally between the Stump Hole and the St. Joseph's Peninsula State Park – a stretch that we all know has been labeled one of the most beautiful beaches in the world.

In 2005, the state awarded Gulf County \$500,000 to conduct a beach management study and related offshore sand search as it relates to the project area. The county hired the firm of MRD Associates of Destin to do the study. MRD intends to find out why we are experiencing this serious erosion and where the sand is going. If they can find where the sand is ending up, the hope is to return it to our beach while at the same time addressing environmental and other related issues.

In addition, the Gulf County Tourist Development Council hired well-known beach economist, Dr. William Stronge, to determine the economic impact our beach has on the local economy. The results of this study may be available later this month.

Of course, we all generally know what these studies will show: this stretch of our beach has suffered a tremendous amount of erosion and it is one of Gulf County's top economic assets. It has become clear that we need a long-range solution to this problem – that solution is beach restoration.

We have tried to save our dwindling beach truck by truck load of sand; or by building walls and other structures to protect the Gulf-front and its homes. These methods are temporary at best.

Stabilizing the shoreline in the proposed project will protect hundreds of beachfront and upland structures. In addition, continued use of recreational beaches will be ensured to all Gulf County citizens and visitors. A wider beach in the area of Stump Hole will significantly reduce the threat of the road being permanently washed out and will also restore the numerous sections of the beach that are no longer passable for vehicles, both county and recreational. The project will also produce added benefits such as restoring the habitat for coastal wildlife and the nesting habitat for marine turtles. Equally as important to Gulf County, but less recognized, are the substantial economic benefits that result from our beaches. Beaches contribute to expanding federal, state, and local tax bases; increase income and employment opportunities for residents; increase visitor spending; and enhance property values. Another benefit of a restored beach is, once completed, it becomes part of the county's physical infrastructure. As such, it is a publicly-owned asset and FEMA funds are then available for repairing future erosion damage caused by any federally-declared emergency storm event. If such funding had been available after Hurricane Opal, Ivan and Dennis, the financial benefit would have been substantial.

In recent years, the state of Florida has embraced beach restoration or renourishment as the best way to restore precious beaches. Simply put, beach restoration is a method of pumping sand from the Gulf back onto the beach. Indeed, in 2005 the state has committed \$73.2 million towards restoration and follow-up renourishment projects throughout the state.

Those projects include Pensacola Beach (8.2 miles) and Panama City (17.8 miles). Both are currently under construction with maintenance nourishment, according to Phil Flood of the state Department of Environmental Protection. Navarre Beach (4.2 miles) begins construction of its initial restoration this month; and Destin (2.2 miles) and Walton County (4.5 miles) are scheduled for initial restoration in January.

Currently, Flood said, there are 42 beaches in the state with active renourishment programs in place. This represents a total of nearly 175 miles of restored beach, located in 60 communities throughout the state.

In 2006, the state is committed to providing at least \$30 million for beach restoration.

It is no secret that these projects are expensive but studies have shown that it is money well spent when compared to the economic and recreational impact of Florida's beaches.

The cost for the project area here – the Stump Hole to the state park – has been initially estimated at \$10 million. However, the study by MRD Associates should provide a more concrete number in coming months.

The good news is that the state will pay for up to 50 percent of the cost if certain requirements are met – including provision for public beach access. Currently, a study is underway to explore options for increasing public access to maximize state funding.

For our part in Gulf County, the project will likely be paid for via a Municipal Services Taxing Unit (MSTU).

The MSTU, or special assessment tax, will be imposed on only those properties located in the project area and can only be used to fund this specific project. The cost of the initial phase of the project which will be primarily funded by the MSTU is more than can be raised in one year's time; therefore, a bond issue will need to be in place to fund the project. Typically the bond repayment is calculated to take place over five years. As a result, the taxes can be collected over that period of time, but the initial bond will still be repaid before a new bond is required to fund ongoing costs associated with maintenance nourishment.

As currently proposed, there will be two separate MSTUs, one for the gulf side and one for the bayside properties in the area. An MSTU is created through an ordinance passed by a simple majority vote of the county commissioners. Such an ordinance must go in effect prior to the tax year in which the special tax is to become effective.

However, if the county commission votes to put the MSTU in place this year, the tax will not automatically be assessed in 2006. By passing the MSTU, the county commissioners simply open the door for the voters in the project area to vote at a later date on whether or not they want to proceed with the project.

In other words, those residents in the project area on the Cape will vote to approve or disapprove spending tax dollars on the restoration project.

This project has a very aggressive timeline with the construction phase beginning as early as August 2007. To see the complete timeline, along with detailed information regarding the project, before and after pictures from other projects and funding information, please visit [www.savethecape.com](http://www.savethecape.com).

Overall, beach restoration projects in the state of Florida are performing well. Many people are under the common misconception that restoration project has failed if sand is added to the beach at a later date. However, with few exceptions, this is a normal and planned stage of a managed beach project.

In keeping with the norm, the project will include 2 phases: restoration and maintenance (commonly called renourishment). The first phase will involve extending the beach to a width set in the engineering study. The second phase will involve anticipated maintenance, or pumping additional sand on the beach, approximately every 6 to 8 years.

After construction, the beach performance is monitored to decide when additional sand needs to be pumped in. Some beaches perform better than expected and do not require renourishment for a decade or more. Some beaches, particularly in the event of severe storm damage like that seen from the 2004 hurricane season, may require additional sand sooner.

Again, the key to the process is not only initial restoration but regular maintenance. Just like painting the house, changing the oil in the car or the continued care and maintenance of anything of value, beaches need periodic attention. An essential part of the restoration plan is to anticipate that need and have the permitting and money in place.

The recreational, environmental and economic future of one of the most beautiful beaches in the country now depends upon beach restoration. Our opportunity to take control of that future is upon us. All we have to do is reach out together and take hold of it. Hopefully, we can join dozens of other Florida communities who have recognized the value of their beaches.

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