

## Surge protector

Panama City Beach may hold the key to stemming the tide of storm erosion

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Along Northwest Florida's erosion-ravaged coastline springs an eerie oasis, where the beach still stands wide and white and seemingly unscathed by two active storm seasons.

Panama City Beach's almost 17-mile stretch isn't entirely a matter of luck, however; it's thanks to continued beach replenishment projects that officials say have saved the area from severe damage.

The first major nourishment project at Panama City Beach was a mammoth undertaking, many years in the works and required the cooperation of almost every property owner at the beach.

Florida's House Speaker Allan Bense, then-chairman of the Tourist Development Council, led the effort starting in 1992 along with local hotelier and developer Charlie Hilton.

The pair went door to door and visited property owners one on one, explaining the need for nourishment while collecting permission for easements necessary to complete the project.

"We had to get almost 1,200 of those easements, and we ended up getting virtually all of them," Bense said.

Hilton said he remembers when the sand stretched 300 feet from the vegetation line, but by the mid-1990s, the situation had become grim, due in large part to the shipping channel on the eastern edge of St. Andrews State Park and leading to the Panama City port.

"Eighty percent of our erosion is caused by that shipping channel," Hilton said.

Hurricane Opal eroded the beaches even further, Bense said.

"Those who weren't sure they wanted the project realized that when the next big blow comes along, they were going to have some serious problems," Bense said.

The 1998 nourishment added a little over 9 million cubic yards of sand and about 300 feet of width to the beach.

And up until Hurricane Ivan, it held fairly steady, losing only about 1.5 million cubic yards of the addition in the time before the storm.

"The project turned out to be wildly successful," Bense said, "and we got very, very lucky in that we had very few storms from 1998 to 2003. There were three or four very calm years."

Where there had been many detractors on the first beach nourishment project, he said, tunes began to change after Ivan.



**Pinnacle Port homeowners Martin and Karen O'Gorman look over a bedroom damaged by Hurricane Dennis' storm surge. Many first-floor units on Panama City Beach suffered storm damage. Florida Freedom Newspapers Photo: Terry Barner.**

"We lost a lot of sand, but the project did what it was designed to do. We sacrificed sand instead of buildings, and it's almost a nice vindication for me."



**Wind and waves from Hurricane Dennis ravage the Dan Russell Pier on Panama City Beach. Florida Freedom Newspapers Photo: Terry Barner.**

Hurricane Ivan left Panama City Beach short about 2.5 million cubic yards of sand above the 1.5 million cubic yards already lost, leading to this year's beach renourishment project aimed at replenishing a total of approximately 3 million cubic yards.

Funding for replenishing the sand lost directly due to Ivan comes entirely from a \$148 million federal pot of "emergency" money approved in Congress last October.

Another portion of the project being conducted in tandem would add the remaining around 500,000 cubic yards of sand and is funded at the federal state and local levels, with a Bay County contribution of between \$2 and \$4 million.

The overall project is expected to cost between \$20 and \$30 million and is being managed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Because the project carried an emergency designation, it had to begin with a goal of completion by the hurricane season's start on June 1.

But bad weather and mechanical difficulties dragged the effort out, and by the time Hurricane Dennis hit July 10, just over five miles had been completed.

Lisa Armbruster, the TDC's beach management coordinator, said there's no way to know exactly how much sand Dennis swept away without doing surveying and whether or when the dredge will revisit the already renourished project areas.

"We may have lost as much as 2 million cubic yards, but that's just a guesstimate," Armbruster said.

The project finally got moving again last week.

"We're slowly getting started again," she said. "Every time I think we're finally getting ahead with this project, it gets blown wide apart."

Assuming there are no more interruptions, renourishment could be completed by October, she said.

Though most beachfront property owners now embrace renourishment, some property owners the first time around were not interested in the effort.

Pinnacle Port and Carillon Beach property owners learned the hard way the value of beach replenishing to upland structures.

"Dennis pretty well took what little bit of sand we had left," said Jack Willis, president of Pinnacle Port's homeowner's association.

He said the water, now practically lapping at some buildings' bases, got under several condos at the complex and breached the walls of the parking lot during Hurricane Dennis. There's now about an eight-foot drop from the lot to the beach, he said.

It all could've been avoided.

Owners in those complexes declined the 1998 project out of a reluctance to grant easements and public access to the beach.

This year's project could fill in sand only to those beaches outlined in the original nourishment, leaving Pinnacle Port and Carillon Beach property owners again in the lurch.

Willis has said that the present owners at Pinnacle Port favor renourishment.

"We need to recognize that the decision-makers during that period of time, I don't think they ever envisioned the situation that we have now," Willis said. "I have no problem admitting that was a mistake