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## Commissioners Approve Beach Restoration Funding Framework

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Tim Croft

A "skeleton" for potential county funding for beach restoration, as it was described by Commissioner Bill Williams, was assembled by the County Commission during Tuesday's regular bi-monthly meeting.

That meat and flesh must still be applied has been, in large measure, where opinion from impacted property owners has shifted from the start. The County Commission approved 4-1 – with chairman Nathan Peters, Jr., as he has from the beginning, dissenting – ordinances which establish the broad strokes of three Municipal Services Taxing Units (MSTU) aimed at beach restoration.

The taxing units are a mechanism through which property owners between the Stump Hole and St. Joseph Peninsula State Park would be asked – at the request of a significant percentage of those property owners – to at least partially fund the rebuilding of the peninsula beaches.

Those property owners – or at least the small number who are registered voters in the county – will have the final say in a voter referendum which would have to be called by the County Commission, and which beach restoration proponents hope would come early next year after studies aimed at putting that meat and flesh – providing data addressing a host of unknowns – are completed.

But for the members of the Beach Advisory Committee – which proposed the MSTU funding and massaged for some five hours last Friday proposals for final language of the ordinances as well as defining the panel's ultimate goals – it was a significant step in a long climb to completing a beach restoration project, which the group hopes will come by the end of 2007, said Laurel Eiler, co-chair of the Beach Advisory Committee.

"I'm extremely happy, now the real work begins," said Susan Wright of the Beach Advisory Committee and among the most passionate and thoughtful proponents of the MSTU concept. "Actually, this (getting the ordinances drafted and approved) took a lot of work, but this is a big one.

"I'm happy, but there is a lot of work left to do."

The ordinances approved by commissioners included several provisions aimed at assuaging some unknowns which had raised the heat in the debate.

While originally written to allow commissioners to levy up to 10 mills on impacted property owners annually, the maximum for an MSTU under state law, all three ordinances cap the millage south of that number on a sliding scale.

The MSTU for gulf-front property owners would be initially capped at six mills; for gulf-side interior property owners the levy could be no more than four mills; for bay-side property owners the cap is two mills.

"Those numbers weren't pulled out of the air," said Roland Wilson, who was recently appointed to serve on the Beach Advisory Committee. "It's what people can live with."

Proponents of beach restoration contend the actual levies could be likely established by the Commission much below those numbers.

The disapproval of voters in any one taxing district – and the total number of registered county voters north of the Stump Hole has been pegged at roughly 160 while impacted property owners total many times that number – would immediately make that MSTU null and void, said county attorney Tim McFarland.

And all MSTUs will sunset upon the paying off of the original debt load, said McFarland, a number yet to be determined and which will be attached to the ordinances by the time they reach referendum.

Proponents of the MSTUs envision them as providing local dollars to pool with state funds from several sources to foot a bill which has been preliminarily tagged at \$12-\$15 million, the tab being one of the major pieces in the puzzle of how to rebuild the beaches.

A study aimed at quantifying what can be done and the costs should be completed by February, its engineer/author has stated.

Michael Dombrowski is also conducting a study to identify sand which, aesthetically and economically, could be a match for the project.

A study to quantify the economics of the beach, highlighting the dollars generated from the peninsula – and, proponents say, spotlighting the need for beach restoration – is nearly complete.

Meanwhile members of the Beach Advisory Committee are attempting to identify and assess the potential for state sources of funding, particularly a trust fund established to partially underwrite similar projects around the state.

The Beach Advisory Committee included in a mission statement read to commissioners language a goal to seek out all available sources of dollars beyond an MSTU.

"I don't think that has happened. I don't think the MSTU is the way to go," Peters said before making a motion to disapprove the first MSTU ordinance, which died for lack of a second.

Wilson said the committee and county should be looking beyond local, state and federal tax dollars for a source of income, possibly a penny sales tax or other mechanism.

The unknowns remain the primary sticking points between the two sides of the issue, members of which were still able to shake hands and pledge to work together after weeks of often fractious debate.

The total cost, what the final millage rates will be for the MSTUs, the fact that those millage rates become part of the county's annual budgetary process, where the sand will come from for restoration, what happens in the years beyond 2007 and the potential completion of the initial project.

They all remain pieces not available and generate much, though not all, of the dissent over beach restoration.

Ron Westmark, for instance, noted that the MSTU amounted to just another tax on property owners and it was being proposed by the some of the same individuals who are among the most outspoken in their displeasure with current taxes.

But as Linda Wood said Tuesday night, one walk along the beaches provides stark pictures to the words "rapidly eroding." Any sensitivity to the cause, to the loss of homes, however, is somewhat mitigated by the huge expanses of gray remaining.

What would be the final product the Commission puts before voters and how will commissioners massage it in subsequent years.

"I think what we are afraid of us is the unknown," Wood said.

While acknowledging that the ordinances passed were just "skeletons" of the final product, Williams said an MSTU would almost certainly be part of the equation regardless of the colors which replace the grays.

"You are right, you will have to trust us and sometimes that is a large challenge," Williams added.

Commissioner Billy Traylor said commissioners had been cautious, no guarantees could be offered at this juncture, but the Commission should not constrain those hoping to rebuild the peninsula's beaches.

"These people are willing to go out and take this chance themselves," Traylor said.

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