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More Issues than Just Sand for Beach Group

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There is more than just new sand needed out on St. Joseph Peninsula.

The Coastal Community Association, an advocacy group for property owners on St. Joseph Peninsula and Indian Pass, held its annual meeting last Saturday with a packed house turning out to Billy Joe Rish State Park.

And while the past few weeks would leave most to assume that the meeting was about all things beach renourishment, the nearly three-hour conclave covered a variety of topics, from fire safety to the cape sewer project to emergency response.

Certainly, the hot topic was the rebuilding of the peninsula's beaches, with several presentations centered around studies taking place to quantify what the beaches mean economically to the county, the feasibility of rebuilding the beaches and what the cost, and how that will be borne, will be.

"There has been a tremendous amount of progress," said Ray Golz of the beach renourishment effort. "In fact a lot of the steps to beach restoration are being taken."

Much of what was covered was well familiar to anyone who had observed a series of County Commission meetings and workshops over the past few weeks, without much of the dissent.

In all, more than half a million dollars in state funds is underwriting two studies on beach restoration, one determining feasibility and costs, the other identifying offshore sand which could be economically moved to the peninsula beaches for restoration.

Those studies are examining rebuilding the beaches from the Stump Hole to the St. Joseph Peninsula State Park, or just a portion of the property represented by the membership of the CCA.

The feasibility study should be completed in February, according to Michael Dombrowski, the engineer contracted with the county to conduct both studies, while the sand search study should be finished the next month.

Dombrowski noted that the last eight years – since a feasibility study was first undertaken by the county – have seen erosion dramatically increase.

"If nothing is done, the shoreline will be at C.R. 30-E or east of that in 30 years,"

In turn, an economic study of the beach being underwritten by the Tourist Development Council, for which preliminary results were provided, is quantifying the economic dynamic between county and beaches.

One-sixth of the county's economic output comes from the peninsula, with 43 cents spent

on the "mainland" for every dollar spent on the peninsula. The peninsula provides roughly a quarter of property taxes in the county, all according to the preliminary data from the study.

And because there are just 72 homesteaded properties – and therefore have assessments capped at 3 percent annually – out of 1,436 taxable properties, some 95 percent of any rise in property values – from beach restoration, for example – directly benefits the county, Golz said.

Golz also sketched out one proposal for at least raising the initial funding for a beach restoration project which has been pegged at \$12-\$15 million, not including ongoing maintenance costs.

This is the where controversy over the entire project revolves, though it was, as expected, less vocally highlighted Saturday that it has in weeks past: not just how to check that erosion, but more particularly who should pay.

County commissioners approved for advertisement last week three Municipal Services Taxing Units (MSTUs), one for gulf-front properties, another for gulf side interior property owners and another for bayside property owners.

Those MSTUs must still be approved by the County Commission by ordinance and an election for impacted property owners would be a final say.

With 72 properties with Homestead exemption in the project area, any binding referendum could involve fewer than 150 votes.

Golz's proposal included a mix of MSTU dollars, county funds from a rise one-time bump in property values on the beaches with restoration, state dollars from several sources and federal dollars for damage from natural disaster after rebuilding.

It is just one option, Golz emphasized, and nothing more than a tentative formula until Dombrowski completes his work.

Other information from the meeting:

* The Florida Department of Transportation has completed most of its environmental work regarding a solution – the department has identified more than a half-dozen options – to maintaining the integrity of C-30E at the Stump Hole.

"We have to get a structure of some sort down there," said Howard Lovett, project coordinator for FDOT. "We are looking at every option."

Because of the potential for federal highway dollars to ultimately become part of the project, final initial environmental work will not be completed for about a year, Lovett added.

Lovett stressed, however, that FDOT has committed no funds to any construction at the Stump Hole

* The Beaches have a growingly active volunteer fire department with 11 first responder trained and two external defibrillators and other equipment added to the department's infrastructure.

Bill VanDerTulip is the new fire chief and added that an EMT class for the volunteer fire

department would begin in January.

* Sheriff Dalton Upchurch outlined budgetary challenges he said he faces in bolstering the one patrol car for the area of the Cape, Indian Pass and on to the Franklin County line.

He said he hoped to improve that number by the some time next year.

* The cape sewer project, which earlier this year added phases, will shed at least one phase on the peninsula due to a lack of applications, said Sherri Dodsworth.

A new window for application was opened Nov. 23 and runs through March, though taps fees have risen from the original \$4,000 of the first two phases, which takes sewer from the city to Tapper's Cut, to \$5,400.

The deadline for the payment of all tap fees for the first two phases is Dec. 31, Dodsworth added.

Completion of Phase I, which has been delayed by a host of factors, remains scheduled by Feb. 1.

Information on the project is available at www.cleancepe.com.

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