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## Commissioners Keep Beach Renourishment Momentum Moving

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Three turned out to be the charm.

After a series of three passionate, sometimes contentious and almost always informative sessions, the County Commission approved for advertisement Tuesday night a series of three Municipal Services Taxing Units (MSTUs) aimed at generating the funds to renourish and rebuild the eroding beaches of St. Joseph Peninsula.

In approving the proposal for advertisement, commissioners made it clear that they were, as they'd been urged by citizens in a variety of tones and words, getting out of the way while a beach advisory committee and impacted property owners, as well as engineers studying the beach and the forces that shape it, move ahead on addressing the many unknowns about the project.

"This is the easy deal, bunting to first base," said Commissioner Bill Williams. "Getting to second base is the tough part."

The tipping point will come in the first quarter of next year.

By March of 2006, according to members of the beach advisory committee and one engineer conducting a study of the movements of sand on the peninsula, the extent and costs of beach renourishment will be quantified and in turn will come a better understanding of state participation in the project.

The MSTUs would have return to the board for a decision on an ordinance and whether to hold referendums on the proposal they adopted Tuesday night.

"The board has the final say," said Commissioner Billy Traylor. "(Allowing advertisement of the MSTUs) keeps the process moving."

The lone dissent came from board chairman Nathan Peters, Jr., who said there were many reasons for his "no" vote, but that they could mostly be found in the unknowns of the project.

"Let me put it the easiest way I can – there are questions, questions, questions and no answers, no answers, no answers," Peter said.

Ultimately, if commissioners let the referendums move forward, it will be up to impacted property owners in each MSTU and their vote as the final arbiter.

The events leading up to Tuesday's special meeting began Nov. 8 when commissioners voted down a proposal to advertise for two MSTUs – one to be paid by gulf-front property owners and another for bayside property owners, citing the blanks in the proposal.

On Friday, the 18<sup>th</sup>, and at the BCC's regular bi-monthly meeting on the Tuesday prior to Thanksgiving, roughly six hours was devoted to roughly four dozen speakers – some more than once – who hashed the proposal sitting before commissioners and the many unknowns that remained.

When, last Tuesday, a 2-2 vote – Traylor and Williams in support – still left the MSTU nowhere, a special meeting was requested in order to allow Commissioner Jerry Barnes, unable to attend the meeting, to vote on the issue.

Time is pressing for proponents of the renourishment project and the MSTU mechanism for providing a local contribution to any state dollars – to implement and begin collecting the tax in 2006 an ordinance must be adopted before 2005 ends. To go beyond the first of the year would mean the earliest the MSTU revenue – if the taxing district(s) is adopted – could be distributed would be 2007.

As it turned out, Barnes' vote wasn't needed as commissioners approved a proposal first brought to them during the special meeting.

That proposal came from Susan Wright, who said she'd resigned in the past week from the beach advisory committee because though she believed in the rebuilding project, she did not want communication with other committee members to lead to allegations of Sunshine Law violations, which had been suggested in general during the previous Commission meeting.

The adopted proposal could ultimately end with three taxing districts: one for gulf-front property owners, another for those who own interior land on the peninsula and a third for bayside property owners.

Under Wright's proposal, and it's important to remember that the chisel has only been set before the stone as this point, gulf-front owners would be the highest millage added to the property taxes already paid.

Interior property owners could pay 75 percent of that number; bayside property owners 25 percent.

That, Wright said, would raise the \$7.5 million which is in the neighborhood – though likely the low side – of projections tossed around right now as to the price tag on a local match.

"We don't know what the final numbers will be," Wright, a CPA by trade, emphasized.

A property owner with land valued at \$500,000, under Wright's example, would pay \$1,700 in additional property taxes the first year, she estimated. An interior property owner would pay \$1,300 in additional taxes; a bayside property owner \$450.

Wright contended that higher property taxes which would arrive as the beach is rebuilt would make tangible contributions to county coffers and that by 2008 that rise in property values due to new beaches would shave the base millage for gulf-front property owners by nearly a full mill, and other MSTU rates would be impacted similarly.

"I think I would support the three MSTUs," said Commissioner Carmen McLemore who had been a staunch "no" in previous votes. "I'd support it with a word of caution. We have the final say. Be very cautious."

In large measure, McLemore was alluding to the many unknowns that exist still about the project, as commissioners also added members to the committee examining beach renourishment or rebuilding.

\* Cost might be the most significant. Until the results of a state-funded study are shared in public sometime in early spring, to determine the cost of the project and maintenance – and how much must be borne by Gulf County residents – is, as Williams is wont to say, like throwing darts.

\* Public access, which would greatly impact state participation, is in question. And any attempt to use Rish State Park, established to benefit the physically and mentally challenged of the state, will face stiff opposition, though the only proposal actually discussed was about an easement at the south end of the property.

\* Also facing stiff opposition, particularly from those who have plied the sea for decades, is the shoals off Cape San Blas as a source for beach sand. Such a proposal could be environmentally devastating said some locals; the answer has been that the state would review all decisions from an environmental viewpoint.

\* Taxing anyone but gulf-front owners could be a tough sell. Until numbers are ready to present, any proposal to add to already hefty tax bills seems problematic.

That is just a sampling of what is ahead for the beach advisory committee. Advertising began this week and a public hearing will be held later in December.

"If it's not right, if it's not fair, I will never support it going to a referendum," Williams said, sounding as if was speaking for the entire Commission.

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