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GCBC Rejects Beach Restoration Funding Proposal

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After four months spent devising a beach restoration plan for Cape San Blas, the county Beach Advisory Committee found itself back at the drawing board Monday night, as the County Commission voted 5-0 to reject the committee's proposed funding mechanism.

The Beach Advisory Committee's proposal called for the project to be funded by a Municipal Services Taxing Unit (MSTU), a special assessment tax levied on property owners within the project area, defined as between the Stump Hole and St. Joseph's Peninsula State Park.

The board was slated to vote on the MSTU next Tuesday, but called the matter to a vote after hearing from a number of bayside property owners who opposed the project.

In an earlier presentation, Beach Advisory Committee chairman Paula Pickett outlined the project's costs and potential benefits to the county. (See related story on 7A.)

A bond that would finance the project's initial phase would be paid out of the MSTU over a five-year period.

The MSTU would need to be put in place before the year's end so that property owners could vote on the proposed tax in a March 2006 referendum.

The ultimate decision to move forward with the project, Pickett stressed, would be made by the property owners.

Several bayside property owners took the podium to argue that they were being unfairly taxed. They believed gulfside property owners were the only ones to gain from the beach restoration.

Though project engineer Mike Dombrowski, with MRD and Associates, stressed the potential benefits to the entire county, he concurred with those who stated that erosion would not reach the eastern side of the proposed project area.

Two separate MSTUs were proposed for bay and gulf side property owners - with gulfside owners making a larger contribution to the restoration project.

Highland View resident Edward Wood, Sr., a Cape property owner, believed the bayside contribution was too great.

Property owners in this area, Wood argued, should not pay the price for those who built their houses in the sand.

"It tells us in the Bible not to build there," Wood said.

Most of the speakers agreed that beach restoration was a worthy goal, but disagreed with the beach advisory committee's proposed funding method and accelerated timeline.

Wood's wife, Linda, stressed that many Cape property owners are not residents, and would thus not be allowed to vote in the referendum.

Currently, only 72 homes within the project area are homesteaded.

"Two hundred people are going to levy the millage for 7,000 parcels," Wood noted. "I find an inequality in that."

Property owners within the project area were to receive notice of their exact tax contribution in February, a month before the referendum.

Commissioner Bill Williams expressed his concern that the board was being asked to put a taxing mechanism in place

without first providing critical information to the potential taxpayers.

Several other factors were also unknown. The state could provide up to 50 percent of the project's total costs - estimated between \$10-\$15 million - but only after the county provided public access points along the proposed site.

Commissioner Nathan Peters, Jr., citing his concerns over several key funding issues, passed the chair to commissioner Carmen McLemore and moved to reject the MSTU.

Commissioner Billy Traylor asked the board to provide Pickett with guidance on how to proceed with what he called a worthy goal.

Traylor supported the beach advisory committee's efforts, offering special commendation to Pickett, but opposed the taxing of bayside property owners.

"Obviously you've got a Plan A, I'm sure there's a back up plan somewhere," he said.

Williams said he would like to see multiple contingencies and time frames.

The Beach Advisory Committee will hold its next meeting this Friday.

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