



SANDBAGS exposed on the east end of Holden Beach this winter (above) are partially covered now by dredge sand from a pumping project. The bags aren't supposed to extend below the mean high water line.

Coastal Panel Takes New Look At Sandbag Rules

BY SUSAN USHER

In the late 1980s the state Department of Transportation piled sandbags parallel to Ocean Boulevard at the east end of Holden Beach as a temporary erosion control structure to protect the roadbed.

More than five years later, remnants of those sandbags or their replacements are still piled along the shore alongside concrete and steel pilings from the old Holden Beach Bridge; the roadway the structure was intended to protect has disappeared. The nearest house is considered "imminently threatened" by erosion; a neighboring cottage has already been removed.

Dredge spoil sand has been pumped on to the east end of the beach in another erosion control effort, partially covering what's left of the sandbags.

The situation is repeated along the North Carolina oceanfront for the equivalent of two continuous miles. There are 3,000 feet of bags in use on Pender, New Hanover and Brunswick County beaches alone, protecting 80 homes, at least one condominium complex and an occasional stretch of street, like Ocean Boulevard East.

Some projects have been in place eight years. Just how long is "temporary"?

Should sandbags be allowed to protect any structure or only habitable structures such as homes, businesses or motels? What about a swimming pool, septic tank or parking area?

Those are just a few of the sticky questions coastal management officials are pondering as they take a fresh look at the use of coastal sandbagging to provide temporary protection of structures threatened by erosion.

Approved as policy in 1985, the same year the Coastal Resources Commission banned hardening of the beach through devices such as sea walls and groins, sandbagging was intended to give property owners a means of temporarily protecting their property while making arrangements to move a threatened or damaged structure.

While there is evidence of some abuse, much of the agency's con-

cerns stem from inconsistent interpretation of rules. The commission is looking for ways to close those loopholes while still providing for temporary protection.

"It's just an enforcement nightmare," Assisting Director of Permitting Preston Pate told members of the commission recently. "We feel the rules are ambiguous, which adds to the enforcement difficulty."

A typical sandbag is about the size of a daybed, weighs between one ton and two tons when full and costs between \$100 and \$120. Marine contractors pump ocean water and sand into the webbed bags. The water runs out of small pores, leaving behind sand. The most durable bags last three to seven years, but may deteriorate sooner under heavy storm conditions or when left uncovered in sunlight or abused by vandals.

At Ocean Isle Beach, where some sandbag projects date from Hurricane Hugo in 1989, "for the most part sandbags have been used the way they should be," as temporary measures, says Building Inspector Druied Roberson. "I can only think of one or two instances where the sandbags are exposed."

In at least one instance sand has accreted on the bags and grass is growing on the resulting dune, in other situations the houses were relocated at a later time.

Roberson only issued two emergency permits for sandbagging after the March 13, 1993, storm.

He said homeowners have had difficulty getting the permission of adjacent property owners—required if the bags extend to within 15 feet of the adjacent property line.

"If you have a 36-foot house on a 50-foot wide lot, you have a problem," he said.

Some adjacent property owners are hesitant to grant permission for a neighbor's sandbagging project because they've learned what the state coastal management office now knows. When left indefinitely, sandbags cause some of the same problems as more permanent efforts to harden the shoreline such as sea walls and groins, said Pate. Although they may protect the immediate property, they may worsen ero-

sion damage to adjacent properties.

"It tends to domino," he said. "Adjacent property owners either see the benefit, or feel the need to protect their own property."

"Once sandbags are in place it is very difficult to get them removed, especially complete removal."

Another part of the reason: Once a cottage is relocated or torn down, the lot that remains is often too small to build on again. Property owners want to hold on to their investment as long as they can.

For instance, sandbags are supposed to be buried, covered with sand like a dune. If uncovered for six months, they are supposed to be removed. But who keeps tabs?

Another agency concern is clean-up of the beach when bags begin to age or are damaged and shred into litter-size pieces. Unlabeled, they cannot be traced back to their owners, who under commission rules are supposedly responsible for bag clean-up and removal.

Bags aren't to be left on the beach, but removed once the erosion reverses, the threatened structure is moved or an alternate erosion management method is adopted.

Part of the problem: There aren't many alternatives available, especially to individual property owners. Pushing sand up on the beach has proved ineffective and bringing in sand from outside is an expensive proposition.

Ocean Isle Beach, said Roberson, has been working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for several years in an effort to begin a town-managed beach project similar to those at Carolina and Wrightsville Beaches. Depending on how much sand is available, the town will determine an erosion limit line, then maintain it.

"Once you do it, it becomes a continuing project and it's expensive," said Roberson, "but you're not going to have additional erosion."

Such projects are economically feasible only with state and federal support. "If they don't get involved in it," cautioned Roberson, "the only people who are going to be able to get to the seashore are the very rich."

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