

OCT. 21 FIRE BRINGS FEARS TO SURFACE

Sunset, Other Resort Communities Eye Ways To Boost Water Pressure

BY SUSAN USHER

While enjoying unprecedented growth in their popularity with vacationers and year-round residents, South Brunswick Islands beach resort towns are also sharing a growing concern about the vulnerability of their island communities to fire.

During the past year, Ocean Isle Beach, Sunset Beach and Holden Beach leaders all began looking at the need to provide additional water pressure and water flow to the islands by such means as adding water storage, looping water lines for increased flow or constructing larger water mains.

An early morning fire at Holden Beach on Oct. 21 that razed two oceanfront homes and scorched two others under a light northerly wind dramatically illustrated their reason for concern: What if there were a fire at mid-summer, when island population and water usage are at their peak and a strong breeze blowing along the oceanfront?

Monday night at the Sunset Beach Town Council meeting at the Maples Clubhouse, Mayor Mason Barber confirmed what Town Administrator Linda Fluegel said most of the town's island residents already suspected.

"We have a problem with water on the island," said Barber, appointing Commissioners Ed Gore and Herb Klinker and Fluegel as a committee to return to council with their recommendations. "Especially during peak times, the water pressure is not sufficient at all times."

That problem "isn't disastrous, but is something that needs to be fixed before it becomes a bigger problem," consulting engineer Phil Norris of Andrew & Kuske said Tuesday.

After checking actual water flow this past July, the Wilmington engineering firm ran a computer model to determine what kind of water pressure Sunset Beach would need to fight a fire when the system was at peak capacity use.

"The average customer would not notice a problem," he said. "But our study has shown that during peak periods, like the Fourth of July, the pressure available is not what we would like to see. It would be marginal or inadequate."

At Sunset Beach, as at other area

beach towns, water demand increases dramatically from winter to summer, as the seasonal population soars. For instance, from November 1993 through January 1994, Sunset Beach billed for 5.2 million gallons of water usage on the island, a quarterly calculation that jumped to 24.9 million gallons for May through July and 20.4 million for August through October.

In an Oct. 31 letter Norris offered three options to consider: constructing a new water line to the island, which is now served by a single 8-inch water main; constructing an elevated tank on the island, or constructing a ground storage tank with booster pumps. The first option could be an "environmental nightmare," as well as very costly, Fluegel noted.

Either of the latter two options would allow Sunset Beach to abandon its existing 200,000-gallon tank on the mainland, and would cost about the same to construct, about \$400,000 to \$500,000 for the tank alone, said Fluegel. The ground-level tank would require more long-term maintenance expense because of the pumps, but would be more aesthetically pleasing.

What the added storage and pressure would do, said Norris, "is really make that a Cadillac system."

Norris said a lot of small towns would probably find problems with low water pressure if they checked. "Sunset Beach is progressive enough to want to know what they have and to bring it up to speed."

Fluegel said Tuesday she's hesitant about recommending that council budget for the improvements next year, what with a majority of island residents purportedly expressing interest in separating from Sunset Beach and creating a town of their own. If so, water pressure would become their concern, not that of Sunset Beach.

Ocean Isle Beach and Holden Beach are also in varying stages of addressing the need for better water pressure on their islands.

Following the Oct. 21 fire, Tri-Beach VFD firefighters said that their equipment could have pumped more than 2,200 gallons of water per minute on the blaze, but could only pump 800 gallons per minute from town hydrants because pressure

drops as the long, dead-end water line nears the west end of the island.

"As close as those houses are, if the wind had been coming from the right direction, I don't know if they could have stopped it," Norris reflected, expressing a concern voiced before firefighters serving all three beach communities.

Holden Beach commissioners, who were discussing the issue even before the fire, plan to apply for a state study grant to determine the island's actual water pressure needs.

At Ocean Isle Beach, commissioners should hear early next year if the town will receive a \$600,000 low-interest loan from the state to build a 500,000-gallon elevated stor-

age tank to supplement an existing 200,000-gallon elevated tank on the island. Their goal is to maintain one day's supply of water for emergencies and for fire suppression needs.

That wouldn't be so difficult or costly to achieve, except that water usage at Ocean Isle runs as low as 100,000 gallons a day in winter, but rises dramatically during the primary rental season, when as many as 20,000 to 22,000 people are served.

"We already need both tanks during peak season. We have used one million gallons a day peak and at least 750,000 a day this past summer," town consulting engineer Finley Boney told commissioners in September. "With the new tank we

Soles To Keep Powerful Senate Leadership Post

State Sen. R.C. Soles of Tabor City will remain in the second most powerful post in the North Carolina Senate during the 1995-96 General Assembly.

State Democrats caucused in Raleigh, where Soles was nominated as deputy president pro tempore by Sen. David Parnell of Parkton. Parkton said Soles "has a high intellect, strong character and great loy-



alty" to senators and has chaired powerful Senate committees.

Sen. Marc Basnight of Manteo was re-elected president pro tempore. Basnight and Soles both are Democrats.

Democrats hold 26 of 50 N.C. Senate seats and, Soles said, "have a sufficient working majority to elect the top Senate officers."

Soles is a graduate of Tabor City High School, Wake Forest University and the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Law. He served in the U.S. Army Reserve from 1957-67 and is currently an attorney in private practice in Tabor City.

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