

Emotion-Laden Growth, Still Dividing Sunset Beach Residents

BY SUSAN USHER

Development of a regional sewer system, the future of a small island straddling the North Carolina/South Carolina line and talk about a new bridge to the island dominated attention at Sunset Beach during 1994, along with a movement toward formalizing through island secession what some property owners viewed as a growing schism of islanders and mainlanders.

Plans for a new town hall and efforts to improve the local volunteer fire department moved forward during the year, and beautification and litter control continued to be a unifying force among townspeople.

A motion to explore island secession failed 24 to 19 in a vote at the Sunset Beach Taxpayers Association Easter weekend, but the idea gained momentum and passed a Labor Day weekend vote by a wide margin after a committee circulated its "Proposal for Independent Government".

"The future of our town, the island included, is certain not to be saved by a small number of malcontents," said Mayor Pro-tem Ed Gore, whose father was the community's original developer. "There are those among us who will never give credit to the benefactors responsible for what we have at Sunset Beach."

Gore termed the proposal "self-serving and opinionated misinformation put forth by fearmongers."

The proposal advocating independence asserted that islanders—whose numbers are being outpaced by growth and town annexations on the mainland—had not been adequately served by or represented in town government, and contended the island's tax base was adequate to create a new town.

Bridge Plan Still Uncertain

The rift was reflected in the continuing debate over the nature of the bridge linking mainland and island, with Sunset Beach's property owners still nowhere near a consensus. In a book maintained by an island business, thousands of vacationers as well as local residents wrote mainly of the picturesqueness and appeal of the existing, single-lane pontoon swing bridge to vacationers and permanent residents, while elsewhere others portrayed the bridge as impractical and a potential death trap for island residents.

Engineering consultants to the state Department of Transportation drew plenty of comment on Dec. 6 when they presented computer-generated photographic views of three "feasible-buildable" alternatives for a new bridge to the island during a public workshop at Sea Trail Plantation. Alternatives offered consumers included a 65-foot fixed span placed either in the center corridor (essentially the existing corridor) or along a western corridor, or a mid-level 30-foot bascule along the center corridor. These three options, plus "no build" and rehabilitation alternatives will be considered in a draft environmental impact statement due out for public comment in spring of 1995.

The environmental impact statement had been ordered by a federal judge in February 1990 after a successful legal challenge by the Sunset Beach Taxpayers Association, which questioned whether the effect of a new bridge on the human and natural environments had been considered fully.

Sewer Authority Seeks Favorable Finding

A directive to prepare a full environmental impact statement was exactly what Piedmont Olsen Hensley engineering consultants to the South Brunswick Water and Sewer Authority were trying to avoid throughout much of 1994.

The authority hired an out-of-town law firm to guide its 201 facilities plan and environmental assessment for a \$35.6 million project through the state approval and permitting process, and engineers completed additional studies in the hope of receiving the finding of no significant impact (FONSI) needed to complete its funding plan based on a combination of state loans, authority-issued revenue bonds and other instruments, plus customer fees and charges.

The state Division of Environmental Management circulated a proposed FONSI in mid-December, but took several weeks to review and address extensive comments of parties including such as the Sunset Beach Taxpayers Association and the N.C. Coastal Federation and others, and equally lengthy responses from the Authority. As of Dec. 25, the FONSI had still not been recirculated.

The SBTA had threatened possible legal action if the town of Sunset Beach participated in a sewer project that did not concurrently plan and develop stormwater management. It asked for a full environmental impact statement to identify and plan mitigation steps to offset environmental impact and to ensure that enforceable stormwater plan existed prior to approval. The authority believed both issues had been addressed fully in its environmental assessment.

Authority Chairman George Knott named a citizens' advisory committee to begin developing a stormwater management proposal, with the cost of the system to be borne proportionally by those contributing to stormwater runoff, rather than by all authority customers.

Focus On Bird Island

A family's interest in developing its property and a public effort to protect one of the last undeveloped barrier islands on North Carolina's southern developed into a year-long sparring match as the future prospects of Bird Island and its "Kindred Spirits" mailbox drew not only local, but national attention.

Island owner Janie P. Price, represented by her son, Rees Poag, as well as a consulting engineer and an attorney, continued seeking permits to develop the island's 33 acres of scattered uplands. It remained unclear whether the family was planning full-scale development of the island, had intentions of selling it to developers, or was simply using the process to establish the worth of the property to others.

At mid-year the state Division of Coastal Management joins the U.S. Coast Guard in deciding the family of Jane P. Price of Greensboro would need to conduct a full environmental impact study—a usually costly and time-consuming review—before proceeding with plans to develop the island just west of Sunset Beach island. In December, though, the Coast Guard's 5th District announced an EIS would not be required, only an environmental assessment. Staff said they had received new information that suggested the impact would be less than first thought.

Rep. David Redwine introduced a bill in the N.C. House of Representatives to set aside \$1 million toward

state purchase and preservation of the island, saying later it was the most popular bill he had introduced. The request wasn't funded, because other conservation acquisition projects were "ready to go," but it wasn't shelved either. Lawmakers left the door open for consideration should the opportunity arise during the year to buy the island. That opportunity never came.

Members of the Bird Island Preservation Society applied to the Coastal Resources Commission seeking additional protection for the island through its designation as a coastal complex area of environmental concern (AEC). If approved the designation would have required the state to develop a management plan for the island's development and protection of its natural resources.

Despite a staff recommendation to the contrary, the CRC voted in October to proceed with the AEC nomination, but in November reverses that decision, saying the island had adequate protection through existing AEC designations and through existing federal, state and town regulations.

"If the public wants to preserve this land," said Commissioner Timothy Thornton, "they need to cough up the money to buy this land."

In 1993, after lengthy study, the Town of Sunset Beach had placed unzoned Bird Island in a conservation reserve district that would allow low-density single-family development on buildable uplands. This past year the Price family, informally and then formally, petitioned the town to amend the zoning to allow denser development by decreasing lot size, increasing the number of bedrooms and decreasing the oceanfront setback. In December the town council unanimously upheld its 1993 zoning, turning down the proposal.

Acting as his mother's agent, Poag appealed Brunswick County's revaluation of Bird Island from \$539,000 (its value in 1986) to \$1.6 million. The valuation had been based on the premise that 85 acres could be developed, but a 1993 study commissioned by Sunset Beach indicated only 33 acres were buildable—worth a \$634,000 tax cut for Mrs. Price.

On a lighter note, beautification volunteers erected the town's first lighted Christmas tree on the N.C. 179 median approaching the bridge and saw a high turnout for the annual Big Sweep in September.



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