

But \$500 penalty is tough

Food-handling rules now easier to swallow

By Terry Pope
County Editor

Revised rules that might govern how restaurants and licensed day care centers serve food appear less difficult to swallow.

Fewer people made fewer comments at a second public hearing held last Wednesday on the Brunswick County Board of Health's proposed food service manager certification ordinance.

The program stresses proper food-handling techniques and hygiene with a goal to protect consumers.

Some say the \$500 fine for violating the policy is still too high.

Other more controversial parts of the ordinance were either cut or revised by a committee of restaurant owners and health staff since the first hearing was held in January.

"You can get a drunk driving charge and not get fined \$500," said Robin Schuster, owner of The Robin's Nest, a Southport day care center.

The fine should be closer to \$50 since it is a new policy, she said. The health board should also consider the cost to businesses after the first 12 months, she added.

There will be no fee for the six-hour training program for the first year, said Andrew Robinson, environmental health supervisor. Classes may be held monthly and in two-day sessions. After that, the county will not foot the bill, and it will cost employers around \$35 per person.

The program will help health officials improve communications with restaurant owners, said Robinson. Food service technology is changing and national reports of food poisoning incidents are increasing.

"I know it will improve our food service industry," he added.

Someone at each restaurant must become certified and the certificate posted at all times. Persons must pass a standardized test consisting of 50 to 60 questions, said Gary McDonald, environmental health specialist.

The certificate can be revoked if the ordinance is violated or if the sanitation grade falls below 80, a "C", in two out of three consecutive grading periods. That could shut down a business.

"It's not just one time that your certificate will be pulled and your doors closed," said Mildred Crissman, owner of Mimi's Cafe in Southport. She worked with a group of five other restaurant owners to help revise the ordinance.

The stiff penalty was added as an incentive for restaurant owners to adhere to the policy. Some owners

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Sandpiper Restaurant

would rather pay a \$50 fine and continue operating in unsanitary conditions, Ms. Crissman said.

"There are many food poisoning incidents that never go to the news," she said.

The fine and certification program is separate from the restaurant grading system, which is regulated under state laws, said Michael Rhodes, health director.

"We want to have some type of penalty to enforce it," said Rhodes. "Maybe it's too high."

The original version required that a certified manager be on duty at all times. It now just requires that someone at the facility hold a certificate. That manager can use training materials to teach other employees.

Bob Williams, owner of the Sandpiper Restaurant in Leland, said few counties in the state have such an ordinance.

"I still feel this is somewhat unnecessary, to go to this length to formalize it to this extent," said Williams.

It creates an "us against them situation" and more expense for restaurant owners, he added. He also objected to the \$500 fine.

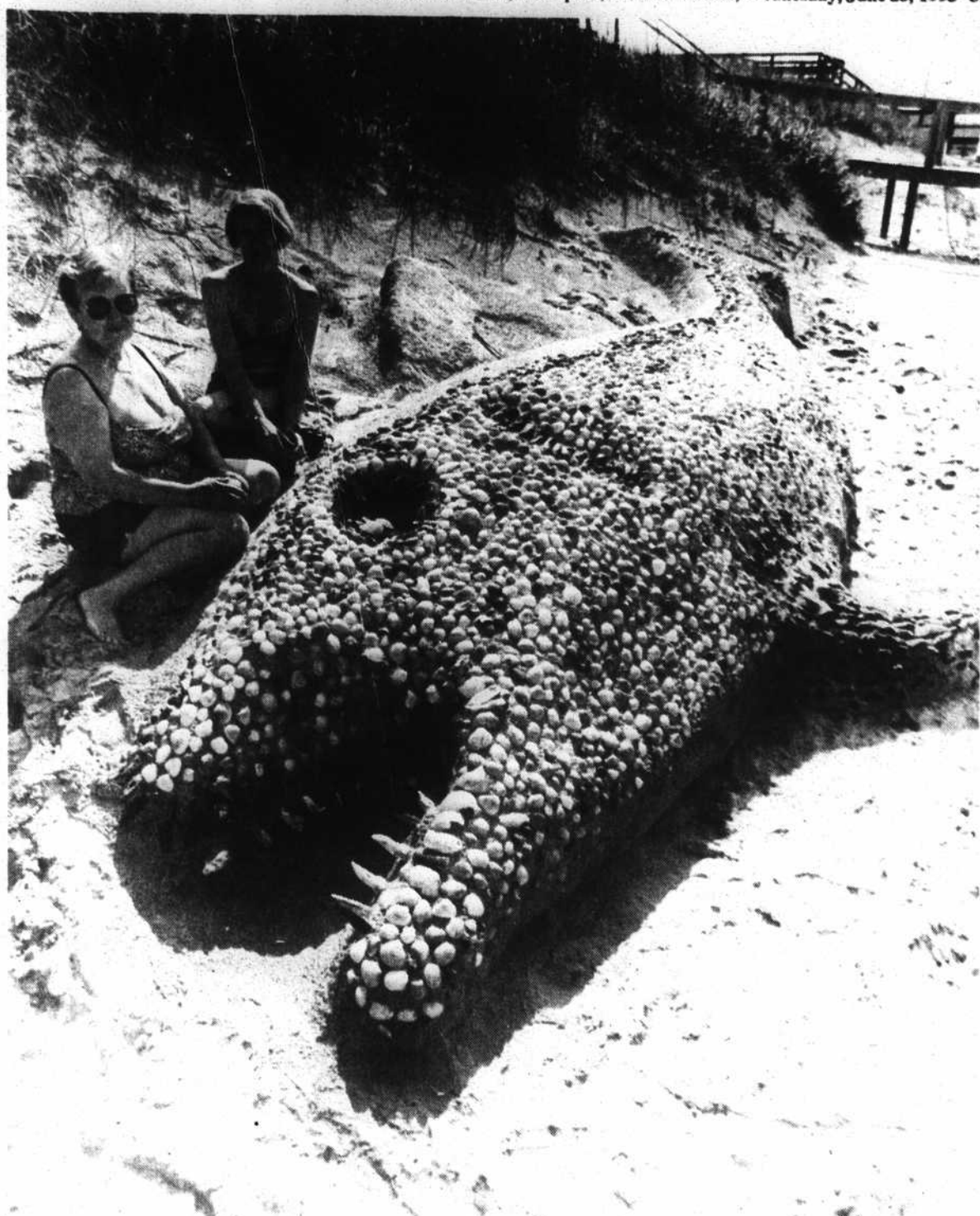
"You don't get a \$500 penalty if you are caught driving drunk in the middle of Wilmington," said Williams. "It seems to be very excessive and unnecessary, except to say if you're bad we're going to get you."

The penalty section was reviewed by the interim county attorney. A business would have two grading periods, or nine months, to have someone certified and to improve the sanitation grade before the certificate is pulled and the doors closed, said Robinson.

"What are you going to do with the \$500?" asked Junior Hughes, owner of Hughes Marina and Restaurant at Shallotte Point.

The money will be used to help fund the training program.

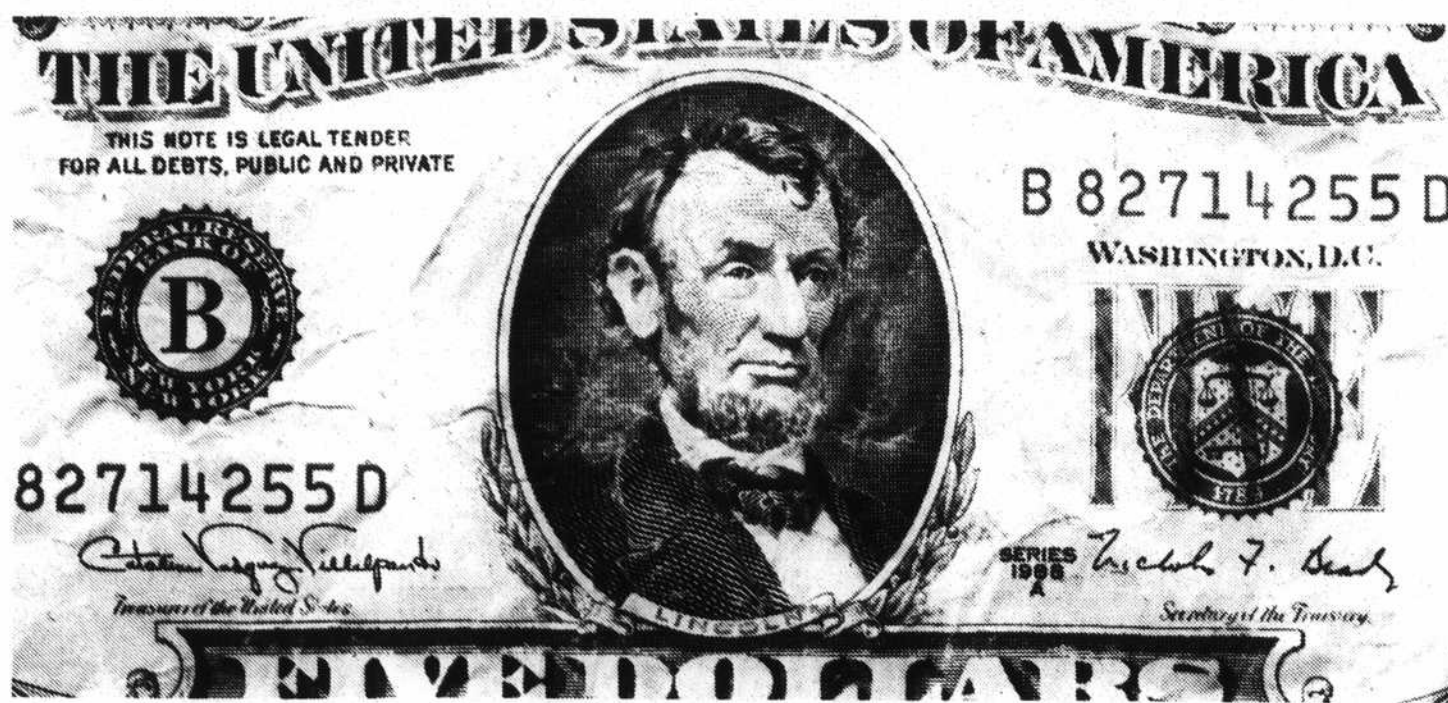
Committee members will review the comments, revise the ordinance a final time and send it to the health board for adoption.



An extraordinary sand sculpture, appropriately dubbed "Shellfish", was created in front of the Woodgeard cottage on Caswell Beach last week. Devised by John McNaughton, a designer, sculptor

and art professor, the project relied on the labor of many helpers and became an inspiration for other neighborhood beach sculptures, including a sea turtle and a sea horse.

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