

Good planning paved the way for the Caswell we know today

► Mayor

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while seated in the sun porch of his Arboretum home, overlooking the Elizabeth River marsh.

Jack and Cora Cook's Alyssum Drive home is the fifth they have occupied in Caswell Beach since leaving Portsmouth, VA, in 1976, he to work for Carolina Power and Light Co. Fresh from coastal Virginia, the couple looked far and wide for a place to live, but was drawn repeatedly to Caswell Beach.

"I had looked at areas I liked," Cook said. "Cora Mae came down a few weeks later and spent, I would say, six months, every day, looking at areas from Hampstead to Myrtle Beach.

"We kept coming back to Caswell Beach. It was the peace and quiet. At that time, with nobody here, there was peace and quiet."

"At that time," as Cook puts it, means before the Arboretum, before OceanGreens, before Caswell Dunes, before Oak Island Beach Villas, before many of the stately homes that grace the Caswell Beach strand.

Caswell Beach in 1976 was in its infancy, both as a municipal corporation and as a place to live. Only a handful of seasonally utilized beachfront homes dotted the strand, comparatively speaking.

"I decided I'd like to build on Caswell Beach," Cook recalled. "The only question was: What kind of house?"

Cook says he found a house he liked down on Long Beach and local builder Norman Perry assured him he could draw designs, alter the floor plan slightly, and reproduce it substantially. The Cooks enjoyed a little bit of luck when a Caswell Beach Road lot was located and bought from an estate.

"We got it. We built and we stayed there until Hurricane Diana," Cook said.

Hurricane Diana in 1984 blew out a window and dumped some 19 inches of rain water into the first of the Cooks' homes. While rebuilding, the Cooks took to their second Caswell Beach home, renting in the Oak Island Beach Villas, the town's first such development.

During that stay, the home on Caswell Beach Road was repaired and the Cooks also bought a new condominium at Caswell Dunes, which was by then under construction. Eventually, the Caswell Beach home was completely restored and the Cooks moved back, but it just didn't seem like home when the Cooks returned to it.

"It never felt the same after the hurricane," Cook said. "It was not like



Jack Cook will end 16 years as mayor of Caswell Beach Thursday to enjoy life at his home overlooking the Elizabeth River marsh and the Intracoastal Waterway. Development of Caswell Beach meant

home anymore. It was just a place."

So, the Cooks placed the Caswell Beach Road place on the market and moved to Caswell Dunes, the third of the four neighborhoods in town in which they have lived.

Eventually the desire for a lifestyle change hit, and the Cooks were on the move again -- this time to Green View Drive and a patio home in the Caswell Dunes development.

A few years ago the Cooks purchased their lot and built their fifth and present home on Alyssum Drive,

consolidating the best of all the living arrangements they had enjoyed in Caswell Beach.

"We really took the parts that we liked about all the houses and put them in this house," Cook said. The Alyssum Drive home features a great room surrounded by two bedrooms on each outer side, a kitchen up front, sun room and patio to the rear. All rooms are accessible by wrap-around hallways.

"You can get everywhere in the house without cutting through some-

where," Cook said.

Cook even has a detached get-away on pilings where he can go to think, or lodge occasional house guests. He calls that backyard get-away his "dog house."

"With the exception of OceanGreens -- that is the only neighborhood we haven't lived in," Cook said. "I've always tried to be fair to all the neighborhoods in town. I've got roots in Caswell Beach Road, the Villas, Caswell Dunes and The Arboretum."

Taking office in 1979, in year four of the town's infancy, one of the first projects to command Cook's attention was completion of the town water system. Ironically, it was the Baptist Assembly's desire to buy water from the town, rather than supply it, as it had prior to 1979, that forced town leaders to construct the oversized eight-inch water main down Caswell Beach Road. The ability to deliver water through that oversized line allowed the town to grow in ways that had not yet been imagined at the beginning of the 1980s.

The story of Caswell Beach in the 1980s is a story of a coastal town seeking to control its destiny as the pressure to develop mounted, seemingly by the day. Hard choices were made.

With an inadequate zoning ordinance in place, multi-family development first came to Caswell Beach with construction of the first phase of Oak Island Beach Villas in the early 1980s. The villas were developed in a section of town the first board of commissioners had set aside for commercial development. It had originally been targeted as a spot for a small strip shopping center, hence there were no setbacks for the area described in the zoning ordinance and, more importantly, no descriptions of what kind of residential construction could be built there.

With no other sizable tract of land available on the oceanfront, the temp-

tation to develop too densely was irresistible on the villas' 12 acres.

Eventually, after Cook and the board of commissioners called three "building moratoriums" while the town's zoning ordinance was changed in mid-construction of the villas, setbacks were put in place and construction density was scaled down.

"They had put something on the town that was not in anybody's best interest," Cook said of the initial villas developers. Later developers of that project, however, would come to the town's aid, first by offering a condo unit to serve as temporary Town Hall, then by donating the land on which the present Town Hall is sited.

But, Cook and the board of commissioners had learned something about multi-family development from the villas and were ready when approached a couple years later with plans for Caswell Dunes.

It was over the development of Caswell Dunes that the community -- residents and property owners at Caswell Beach -- was initially torn and later mostly reunited by the actions of the mayor and board.

"When Caswell Dunes was first planned, Norman Perry was the spokesman and the initial plan called for 1,200 units," Cook recalled. "Can you imagine what 1,200 units at Caswell Dunes would look like?"

"We had several people in town that were just adamantly opposed to multi-family housing anyway."

Among those were Duncan Stuart and Bob McCracken, who were elected to the board of commissioners in 1981 on staunch anti-multi-family platforms.

A determining vote to accept a preliminary proposal for Caswell Dunes came before the board in 1983 with McCracken out of town on business. It was at that meeting Cook cast the only tie-breaking vote of his 16-year mayoralty.

"George Kassler voted for it, Duncan Stuart voted against it. That is the only time I exercised the tie-breaking vote," Cook recalled.

Stuart fumed. He and McCracken said they had been sold out.

Finally, both were brought on board when the town's single most important development decision was made: There would be no more density of development than one unit per 10,800 square feet of available space in Caswell Beach. That's a rule that holds to this day. This development rule made supporters out of many opposed to multi-family development of any kind.

The formula has worked and the town is better for the multi-family development the town at once sought to allow, yet control so stringently.

"That was when we all decided that multi-family could be good, if done properly," Cook said. "I think we've gotten a good bit out of Caswell Dunes. We're not crowded and we've got a good tax base for such a small town."

Cook and commissioners were occupied with development questions related to the various subdivisions and with formulation of a land use plan update throughout most of the 1980s, but by 1990 most of those questions had been settled. A host of would-be developers had come and gone. Project ownership had changed several times and it became hard for observers -- including newspaper reporters -- to tell the players without a scorecard at times.

Most of the development questions had been answered. The workload of local government slacked off some.

"This is one of the things the newcomers don't understand," Cook said. "We met constantly in those days. My last four years have been relatively quiet. The first ten of them were hec-

Wastewater disposal top Caswell issue

What will be the important issues in the post-Cook years at Caswell Beach?

Wastewater management, the mayor says.

He says wastewater reuse plans like the one advanced by neighboring Yaupon Beach and the Oak Island Golf and Country Club must be fine-tuned and accepted by the public.

"Everyone is questioning environmental impact," Cook said of the Yaupon Beach plan. "I would think the environmentalists would be the first ones standing up and supporting this type thing. They should be asking themselves, 'What can we do to make it better to where we can support it?' instead of just saying 'no.'"

"We recycle aluminum cans and newspapers, we've got to find a way to recycle water."

As Cook prepares to leave the post he has held for the better part of two decades, he sees wastewater management and beach renourishment as the two biggest issues his successors will have to address.

"Wastewater treatment is the number-one big thing I can see," Cook said. "All our property has been platted and zoned. It's all spoken for. Eventually we are going to have to have a wastewater treatment system."

"That's all I can see, except for a good erosion control program. We've got to find some way to get back the sand the corps (of engineers) takes out of the channel. We need to make the corps show us where that sand comes from. If they can't, maybe we shouldn't dredge any more. It's easy for them to haul the sand out to deeper waters and dump it, but we're paying a price for it."

Beach maintenance and renourishment is an expensive proposition, but without an attractive beachfront the very economy of Caswell Beach and the tax base shaped by the development decisions of the Cook administration in the 1980s could be shaken.

"If we don't find a way to renourish the beach, we won't have to worry about wastewater treatment or anything else," Cook said, "because we won't have that many houses left."

The Cooks plan to take it easy for a while. Although Cook recently retired from CP&L also, Caswell Beach will remain home for the foreseeable future, yet a move farther south may be in the cards later on.

The couple has established a pattern of three or four visits to the Bahamas each year and looks forward to the coming days when schedules will be less hectic.

Sixteen years in local government is a long time, but for Cook, his long stay in the mayor's chair has been gratifying.

"I think we've got the best beach town in North Carolina. If it weren't, I wouldn't be here. I'm glad to have been part of making it the best."

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Multi-family housing looked good on paper

By Richard Nubel
 Municipal Editor

Faced with preliminary plans for Caswell Dunes in the early 1980s, Cook and others saw a need for high-quality, multi-family housing, but had a tough sell convincing fellow commissioners Duncan Stuart and Bob McCracken.

A simple display, drawn on a sheet of scrap paper, led to the town's most important development decision: Development density would not exceed one unit per 10,800 square feet of available land.

"I sat down and I drew up a map with 40 single-family houses" that could have been placed in the front 20 acres of what is now Caswell Dunes, Cook said. "Then I drew a second map of seven multi-family clusters with 42 units on five acres in that front 20."

McCracken by that time had already come to accept the multi-family concept, but Stuart had been more stubborn.

"Duncan jumped on it," Cook said. "My God, is that what I've been opposed to?" he said. From that day on, Duncan never opposed multi-family development."

As Caswell Dunes grew, and its quality became apparent, few in town objected.

"That was when we had to do some real planning," Cook recalled. "How can we make development realistic, yet allow for multi-family development?"

What the mayor and the board of commissioners of the early and mid-1980s did to secure acceptable multi-family development was devise a formula. They would allow development no more dense than one unit per 10,800 square feet of available land, a formula embodied in the town's planned unit development ordinance -- a first in Brunswick County -- which stands today.

"That restriction -- one unit per 10,800 square feet -- that was determined from the average density of the second row of Caswell Beach Road," Cook said. "Not many people realize that."

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