

# Signs Of Hurricane Hugo Remain One Year Later

BY DOUG RUTTER

It's been almost a year since Hurricane Hugo brushed the Brunswick County coastline, but there are still many signs of the storm that most people agree could have been much worse.

From unstable dunes and narrower beaches to unsettled flood insurance claims, there are plenty of reminders of the massive hurricane that came ashore the morning of Sept. 22, 1989.

Most of Brunswick County was spared the damage that made Hugo the most destructive hurricane in history in terms of property damage. But some of the most valuable land in the county—lots on the barrier islands—was lost to erosion, possibly forever.

The eye of the hurricane passed over Charleston, S.C., about 135 miles south of Shalotte. But the tropical storm was big enough to reach out and slap the Brunswick County coast, causing an estimated \$90 million in property damage.

Most of the trouble was at Long Beach, Holden Beach and Ocean Isle Beach, where the hurricane's storm surge flattened dunes and walls of water crashed into oceanfront homes.

The hurricane was credited with wiping out about \$12 million in tax base on the county's three largest island communities, according to Brunswick County Tax Administrator Boyd Williamson.

Since the storm, several local governments and property owners have been busy trying to recover what was lost, including roads, beach accessways and homes.

Local governments affected by the storm received about \$450,000 in state and federal public assistance to help cover losses. Beach communities also were given \$319,660 for emergency dune repairs.

In the South Brunswick Islands, Holden Beach has led the way in terms of spending money to recover. The town spent nearly \$350,000 to rebuild its frontal dunes and stabilize them with sand fence and beach grass.

The expense spurred town officials to adopt an ordinance prohibiting people from walking on the dunes. It also resulted in a three-percent tax rate increase, which is supposed to be dropped in two years.

Holden Beach received \$63,270 from the state to help pay for the dune project, according to town tax collector Sylvia Bissell. The town also received \$81,455 to cover the cost of cleanup and repairs after the hurricane.

Ocean Isle Beach received \$124,000 from state and federal pockets to help rebuild its oceanfront dunes and another \$113,720 in public assistance, which was a reimbursement for the money the town spent on hauling debris and other emergency measures after the hurricane.

Because of a wide beach and deep oceanfront setbacks, Hurricane Hugo didn't cause the headaches at Sunset Beach that it did at the other two beaches in the South Brunswick Islands.

Although the island's extensive dune structure was damaged, Mayor Mason Barber said the state's southernmost beach is well on its way to recovery.

"We've come a long way," Barber said in a recent interview. "We're just extremely well pleased with the amount of sand that's started coming in and the way it's building back."

Town Administrator Linda Fluegel said the town spent \$9,103 recovering from the hurricane. The state and federal government later reimbursed the town the full amount.

Most of the money was used to clean up debris, spray for mosquitoes and control traffic immediately after the hurricane, Mrs. Fluegel said. "We were right back in working order 24 hours later."

Besides a weakened dune structure and ongoing construction of the Sunset Beach Fishing Pier, Mrs. Fluegel said the only reminders of the hurricane come during excess-



**THESE THEN AND NOW PHOTOGRAPHS** show the changes that have occurred in the 600 block of Ocean Boulevard West at Lions Paw Drive at Holden Beach since Hurricane Hugo made landfall near Charleston, S.C., last September. The house at right, which was on the verge of collapsing after the storm, has been

moved closer to the street. The house at left in the 1989 photo was repaired but left in its place. The most recent photograph also shows a new house, aptly named After Hugo.

—STAFF PHOTO AND FILE PHOTO BY EDDIE SWEAT



sive high tides when debris washes up on the strand.

She said she believes it's debris from other beaches that could be caught up on a sandbar offshore. "We get just about everything washing up here—everything but money."

Brunswick County governments haven't been the only ones taking advantage of state and federal programs since the hurricane. Hundreds of homeowners have looked to Raleigh and Washington, D.C., for help getting back on their feet.

North Carolina homeowners filed 1,112 flood insurance claims since the storm. Most of the claims, if not all of them, were from Brunswick County, said Donald Collins of the Federal Insurance Administration.

The federal government has paid off 844 of the claims, with payments totaling \$6,569,878. The average payoff was \$7,784, Collins said, and all but 13 of the claims have been settled.

In the weeks and months following Hugo, more than 400 Brunswick County homeowners applied for a federal program that pays people to move or demolish homes that are seriously threatened by erosion.

Jim Herstine, regional chief of the N.C. Division of Coastal Management, said he received 422 applications for the program, mostly from Ocean Isle, Holden and Long beaches.

Of the total number of applications, 177 of them were withdrawn before either being approved or disapproved for federal assistance. Herstine said 181 of the remaining applications were approved and 64 were denied.

Whalen Blair, who works for the Federal Emergency Management

Agency (FEMA) in Washington, said 44 of the homeowners who received local approval took the next step and filed claims under the Upton-Jones provision of the Federal Flood Insurance Program.

Thirty-six people applied for federal money for demolishing their homes, he said, and eight asked for

money to help relocate their houses.

So far, Blair said the federal government has approved half of the local claims. FEMA has paid county property owners more than \$1.3 million for destroying 18 houses and moving four others threatened by erosion.

Under another program, ocean-

front property owners who hired contractors to bulldoze dunes to protect their land have been reimbursed \$290,230 by the state, according to Ms. Hoffman.

Through the individual family assistance program, she said area residents have received \$24,094 to help cover uninsured losses.

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