

# Bird Island's Development, Conservation Potential Explored

BY LYNN CARLSON

Bird Island has some, though limited, development potential and should be zoned as a conservation district in which homes could be built only with permission of the Sunset Beach Board of Adjustment.

Those were the conclusions of two Wilmington-based consulting firms reporting to a joint workshop of the town council and planning board Monday night. No actions were taken in the informal session, and members of both boards expressed satisfaction with the consultants' findings and recommendations.

Bird Island's future has become an issue of increasing concern in the town since owner Janie Pace Price of Greensboro began seeking permits to develop 15 building sites there and to connect them with Sunset Beach by a 1.15-mile-long system of causeway and bridges. Bird Island lies in Mad Inlet between Sunset Beach and Little River and straddles the N.C.-S.C. border.

Areas of Bird Island are nesting sites for threatened and endangered species including the piping plover, least tern, black skimmer and loggerhead turtles. At least one rare plant, the seabeach amaranth, also grows there. It is a popular spot with local residents and vacationers who for years, without au-

thorization from Price, have taken boats there or walked to the island through Mad Inlet at low tide.

Price's proposal currently is on hold in the state's Office of Coastal Management while her agents provide additional details about her plans.

Legislation sponsored earlier this year by Rep. David Redwine, D-Brunswick, provided for a feasibility study to determine whether the state might buy Bird Island, one of two remaining undeveloped barrier islands in North Carolina. That study is scheduled to begin in mid-October. If the island were to come under state ownership, the town's zoning and land use regulations would become moot.

Rob Moul of Wilmington's Land Management Group presented a report detailing the natural and regulatory restrictions affecting Bird Island's development potential. Those limitations, he said, include soils, water table depths and wetlands, as well as rules and regulations such as those imposed by the state's Coastal Area Management Act (CAMA) and the Federal Emergency Management Act (FEMA).

While the island's total land mass is 148.4 acres, Moul said, more than half of it is protected saltwater and freshwater wet-

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—Rob Moul

lands. Another 32.7 acres is unusable frontal dune, upper beach and low-elevation sand flats which would fall within the CAMA or Sunset Beach setback requirement zone.

That leaves 33 acres of buildable uplands which could support septic tanks, but any homesites would have to be "highly scattered and non-contiguous," Moul said, "making much of (the suitable land) practically unusable."

His report adds, "There are certainly large enough segments of the property which meet all regulatory thresholds, but they are scattered about, making access and utility extension a critical and expensive issue."

Bird Island's east and west ends have been identified by the regional CAMA office as inlet hazard areas. Moul said these areas could support "only low-density easily relocatable structures;" although the twin rock jetties along Little River Inlet have stabilized the eastern end of Bird Island, the narrow west-end beach is vulnerable to formation of another inlet, he concluded.

Although Bird Island has no "classic" maritime forest, Moul's report says, "evidence indicates the island is relatively young and unstable. The ground water table is rising and the dune system is still migrating."

The most significant regulatory barrier to Bird Island's development could prove to be 1982 federal "COBRA" law, Moul said, which made Bird Island ineligible for federal flood insurance. In addition, claims resulting from massive hurricane damage in recent years have most private insurers "bailing out" of insuring properties in COBRA areas, Moul added.

"The fact that it's going to be impossible to get insurance is probably the most significant obstacle to development potential," he concluded.

## CONSERVATION ZONE

Moul's report was followed by that of

Peggy Hayes of Wilmington's Hayes & Associates, who said the town's wishes to properly zone Bird Island and to establish a conservation zone for Sunset Beach "turned out to be one and the same."

Hayes presented plans for a conservation district which would spell out uses for Bird Island. Under her proposal, single-family residential dwellings which meet several criteria would be allowed, but only through special permission of the town's board of adjustment. That board, Chairman Richard Good explained, is "the planning board wearing a different hat."

Among the proposed criteria are a minimum lot size of one acre; a 50-foot buffer between homes and wastewater treatment systems, wetlands, streams or ponds; maximum lot coverage of 10 percent by buildings or pavement; 35 feet height limit; and a maximum of four bedrooms per home.

Hayes said her proposal would allow the board of adjustment to impose additional criteria when applications are filed. This process would "put the burden of proof on the property owner," Hayes said. "They'd have to provide evidence of what they plan to do." Public hearings would have to be held on the applications, Good added.



Gail Burroff and her son Sammy.

## Boards Leave Orton Lands In Rural Zone

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ular tourist attraction, and Orton Pond, the county's largest freshwater lake. The land use plan identifies these as important historic and wetland areas that should be protected.

Because of its access to a deep water port, Foy said land along the western shore of the Cape Fear River has historically been considered an ideal location for heavy industry. He said a petroleum company had once considered building an oil refinery there, but the plan was scrapped.

Calling the family "good stewards" of the land, attorney William Fairley said the tract was too large to attract a single buyer and would have to be developed in pieces. He said it would be in the Sprunts' best interest to assure that one part of their land was not devalued by an inappropriate use of another.

"It would take a lunatic to sell part of the land to an industry that would lower the value of the neighboring land owned by the Sprunts," Fairley said.

Noting Brunswick County's high unemployment rate, Fairley said that

## Incorporation To Be Topic For Seaside

Rep. E. David Redwine and Ellis Hankins, an attorney with the N.C. League of Municipalities, are expected to attend a community meeting next Wednesday on the proposed incorporation of the Seaside community.

The meeting will be held at 7:30 p.m. at Coastal Auction House (formerly Newsome's Island Supply) at the intersection of N.C. 179/904 and Ocean View Landing Road.

The agenda includes discussion of a town charter and proposed boundaries. This is the latest in a series of meetings on incorporation of the former fishing village and trading center, which is located between Ocean Isle Beach and Sunset Beach.

All interested persons are encouraged to attend the meeting to voice opinions and ask questions.

If Seaside were to incorporate, it would become the 18th municipality in Brunswick County. It is one of two communities currently discussing incorporation; the other is Sunset Harbor on Lockwood Folly River. For either to become a town would require passage of a bill by the state legislature and a community referendum.

## Seasonable Weather Predicted

South Brunswick Islands residents can look forward to comfortable weather over the next few days, with near normal rainfall and temperatures.

Temperatures should range from the mid-60s at night into the mid-80s during the daytime, with about a half-inch of rainfall, Shallotte Point meteorologist Jackson Canady said Tuesday.

For the period Sept. 15 through 22, he recorded a maximum high of 89 degrees on Sept. 16 and a minimum nightly low of 64 degrees on Sept. 15.

A daily average high of 87 degrees combined with an average nightly low of 69 degrees for a daily average temperature of 78 degrees. That was about 3 degrees above average, said Canady.

At his home near the Point, he measured 1.56 inches of rainfall.

restricting industrial development of the Orton lands would "cut off this area of the county from decent jobs." He said that without another large industry, the Southport area could only look forward to a future of relatively small employers offering low-wage jobs.

"By taking away the highest and best use, you run the danger of forcing the owners to develop smaller tracts and make some use of the property that would maximize their return," Fairley said.

Foy said the Sprunts were being punished for not developing the property sooner. He said restrictive zoning could deter an industry from choosing a site on the Orton property and force the owners to subdivide.

"You might end up with one-acre tracts and expensive houses along the river," he said. "But I don't know how many people in Brunswick County could afford them."

Glenn Harbeck, the Wilmington planning consultant hired to help update the land use plan, said the "rural" classification would not prevent the Sprunts from attracting heavy industry to the area. It would, however, give the county some measure of control in assuring an appropriate use for the land.

The land use plan says, "Industries may also locate in the rural area or, in the case of especially large industries, may wish to seek special designation as a rural industrial area."

Noting the presence of fragile land and water areas along most of the riverfront, the plan also gives the county "the option to assist industry in accommodating their access needs to the shipping channels of the Cape Fear River."

Planning Board Chairman John Barbee said he had heard much concern expressed in the Southport area that an inappropriate industry could spoil the appearance of approaches to the city. Several miles of N.C. 133 between U.S. 17 and Southport are bordered on both sides by the Orton lands.

Under the proposed zoning ordinance, the Orton lands are classified as "rural," which would prohibit industrial development. Laurence Sprunt has asked the board to zone

the property "rural industrial," which would allow such uses as "animal slaughtering and processing operations," incinerators "for human and animal life forms" and "hazardous materials treatment facilities."

Representatives of the City of Southport last week asked the planning board to remove several of those proposed uses from the "rural industrial" zone, which currently encompasses the Brunswick Nuclear Plant and the Military Ocean Terminal at Sunny Point, located just north of Southport.

Calling the Orton lands "a beautiful, pristine area," Barbee said he was opposed to a "rural industrial" zoning designation.

"We're not opposed to an industry being put there, we just want some control over it," Barbee said.

Commissioner Gene Pinkerton agreed, suggesting that the boards retain the "rural" land use classifica-

tion and consider a "commercial manufacturing" designation on the zoning map. Any official change to the zoning map would have to wait until after a public hearing.

"Mr. Sprunt and I aren't going to be here forever," Pinkerton said. "I just don't want to give him a blank check."

Under the proposed zoning ordinance, the "commercial manufacturing" zone would allow such uses as warehousing, freight handling facilities, trucking and transfer operations and lumber yards. Manufacturing plants are not listed as permitted uses, nor are they included among the uses allowed by special permission by the board of adjustment.

The board of commissioners has scheduled a public hearing on the proposed zoning ordinance for Tuesday, Sept. 29, at 7 p.m. in the public assembly building at the county complex in Bolivia.

## It's Up To You To Find Out

■ If you own property in certain areas of Brunswick County, you could be required to have a 20,000-square-foot lot to build a house while your neighbor needs only 7,500 square feet.

■ If you have a certain type of billboard or sign that advertises your business, you might not be allowed to repair it if a freak storm blows it down.

■ If you buy a mobile home that was constructed before July 1, 1976, you may not be allowed to live in it anywhere in Brunswick County.

■ If you want to build a gas station north of U.S. 17, there may be only five areas in the county where you can do so.

Those are just some of the proposals that will become law if the Brunswick County Board of Commissioners adopts the zoning law now under consideration.

Yet fewer than 200 county property owners have taken the time to examine the draft ordinance or the map of proposed zoning districts, according to County Planner John Harvey.

The planning office now has 261 detailed maps showing exactly where proposed zones will begin and end. Harvey encourages anyone who owns property in Brunswick County outside town limits to visit the planning department and determine the land's proposed zoning classification. Copies of the zoning law also are available for inspection.

A public hearing on the draft zoning ordinance will be held on Tuesday, Sept. 29, at 7 p.m. in the public assembly room at the county complex in Bolivia.

"The public hearing is to solicit comments about the ordinance and the zoning map. It is not a time for people to ask how their land is zoned. They need to find that out before they come," Harvey said.

Questions about particular parcels of land cannot be answered over the phone, he said. Property owners who want to find out how their land is zoned should come to the planning office in person with an accurate description of the location, preferably by parcel number.

## Incentives Part Of Johnston Contract

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board and superintendent no later than July 15 each year, except this contract year, when the goals are to be set by Jan. 15, 1993;

■ semi-annual written comment on any inadequacies in his performance plus an annual written evaluation and opportunities to discuss superintendent-board relationships;

■ membership charges for professional and/or civic groups as the superintendent deems necessary;

■ use of a motor vehicle with cellular phone for travel within and outside of the system;

■ reimbursement for moving expenses up to \$3,500 and five months' housing allowance of up to \$700 per month; and

■ an annual medical exam at the board's expense.

Johnston has also agreed to take on only limited outside employment, subject to the board chairman's approval and quarterly review by the

board.

The board is to refer criticisms, complaints and suggestions to Johnston for study and recommendations, and is to "refrain from individual interference with the administration of school policies except through board action."

Johnston will succeed P.R. Hankins as superintendent. Hankins plans to retire the end of the month.

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