

Port Aransas South Jetty Newspaper article 1/12/2006

Beach maintenance policy under way

By PHIL REYNOLDS
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City council members got their feet wet with a look at beach management practices on Tuesday, Jan. 10, when coastal geologist Dr. Richard Watson presented a two-hour-long program on beach erosion and geology.

The program – a council workshop, not an official meeting – was designed to give council members a firm footing in how to balance the need for keeping beaches safe for both pedestrians and drivers while at the same time

allowing sand to accumulate as dunes, which Watson calls the city's first line of defense against storms. Watson is a longtime critic of the city's practice of removing sand from the dune area and depositing it near the water line, where waves wash it farther down the shore.

He reminded the council that currents that flow along the beach, called "longshore currents," spread sand and sediment by churning up the tiny particles and moving it by wave action. An equivalent of 250 dump trucks a

day is moved along the Texas shore this way, Watson said.

Most spots on the Texas shore are so-called erosion zones, where more sand is washed away than is deposited. One of the rare natural deposition, or accretion, areas is on Padre Island between here and the Rio Grande, where currents converge from two directions and leave more sand than they wash away. Port Aransas is another accretion zone because of the "shadow" provided by the jetties from currents moving generally north to south, he

major factor in causing beach erosion along Texas coasts is that "we've turned the rivers off."

Reservoirs built along Texas rivers trap sand and sediment that would normally be carried to the coast and used to help build the coastline, he said. In addition, much of the water that would normally flow to the Gulf of Mexico is being used before it gets to the coast.

What Port Aransas needs to be prepared for is another series of storms of the magnitude of Katrina or Rita – but that hit here instead of near Houston or New Orleans, Watson said.

Forecasters predict that the Gulf of Mexico is entering a period of about 30 years when hurricane activity will be increasing, much as it increased in the 1920s-1940s, he said.

He noted that part of the problem is that few people have seen in person what a hurricane can do, thus aren't prepared for the damage.

As examples, he pointed to Carla (1961), Beulah (1967) and Celia (1970).

Carla, which made landfall north of Port O'Connor, nevertheless swept the Port Aransas area with winds of 150 miles an hour and a storm surge of about nine feet.

Beulah, which made landfall well south of here, still cut the island at Corpus Christi Pass, Newport Pass and Packery Channel.

Celia – the most recent storm to hit Port Aransas itself – caused a storm surge here of 9.2 feet. "Most of the town was flooded, but there were no frontal washouts across the island because of the (protection of) the dunes," Watson said.

"All this is incredibly valuable sand that wants to build us a seawall," he said of the sand that the city is mov-

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Beach plan in works

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ing from the foot of the dunes to the water's edge.

Watson said he doesn't want to eliminate roadways on the beach or force vehicles off the beach, nor does he want to endanger beachgoers. He believes, however, that the more sand we can allow to accumulate in the dunes, the better off we are.

"We want as much sand volume there as we can possibly get," he told the council. "There is no downside. We maintain the full utility of the beach and get additional hurricane protection at no cost to the city."

Among his suggestions is moving the bollards that separate vehicle traffic from pedestrians closer to the water's edge, allowing the dunes room to expand toward the Gulf.

City officials, however, worry that narrowing roadways or restricting the area where pedestrians are protected by bollards on the beach will lead to

nervousness on the part of visitors or even danger to beachgoers.

"I remember the years before we had the posts (along the beach) and families were afraid to come here," said Mayor Georgia Neblett. "The reason we are doing what we're doing now is because that's how to keep the beach safe and driveable."

"We have to deal with a balancing act," agreed Councilmember Mike Hall.

"I think the same citizens who tell you they want the dunes to grow would also be very upset if they lost what they moved here for, the beach," he added.

Neblett promised that at the council's next regular meeting an agenda item would deal with a committee formed to study the beach and what the best course of action is for the city to take.

"We're all after the same thing," she concluded.