

House Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife & Oceans  
“Vanishing Beaches:  
Coastal Erosion and its Impact on Coastal Communities”  
Saturday, July 14, 2007; 11:30 am  
La Quinta Inn & Suites, 7000 Padre Boulevard  
South Padre Island, TX 78597

***Robert N. Pinkerton Jr.***  
***Mayor***  
***Town of South Padre Island***

There is a map from the University of Texas, Bureau of Economic Geology, which shows that much of the Texas coast is eroding. I don't know much about the rest of Texas, but I do know South Padre Island.

The Town has known for many years that our tourism is directly related to the quality and width of our beaches. We created our Economic Development Corporation (EDC) specifically to make sure that our beaches were the best we could make them. The EDC was tasked with studying and finding funding for beach renourishment efforts.

And we did a great job. We work with the Texas General Land Office, the US Corps of Engineers and the Port of Brownsville on what we consider major beach renourishment events. We had a schedule for these events: every two years the Port of Brownsville would dredge their entrance channel (the Brazos Santiago Pass) and we would get the good sandy, beach-quality material for our beach. This cycle was working very well and we thought we had adequately planned for and taken care of the problem of erosion - our beaches were nice and broad; our dunes were growing and becoming more and more vegetated; and we had received the Top Restored Beaches Award in 2005.

But since the summer of 2005 we've been hit with one thing after another – starting with Hurricanes Rita and Katrina (2005) followed by back to back cold fronts in the winter seasons of 2005 and again in 2006. Although the Town did not sustain a direct hit from either of these hurricanes, wave action from the hurricanes dramatically reduced our dune system. During the winter months, the Town normally experiences high tides and narrow beaches, but the cold fronts during these last two winters brought in significantly high energy waves which also did their part to narrow our beach and reduce our dune system.

The Town's last big beach renourishment event took place in November of 2004. Our next scheduled beach renourishment was supposed to be in November of 2006, but because of the wave action of hurricanes Rita and Katrina in the Gulf, the Port of Brownsville experienced major silting of their ship channel and had to have an emergency dredge to clear the channel to get ships into their port. We missed out on that opportunity to put sand on our beach because the Port ended up working out a deal with the USACE to get one of their training hopper dredges down and cleared the channel just enough to get boats in and out of the channel.

The Port's channel silted in again in 2006 and they needed to dredge the channel. We missed out on that opportunity because the bids came in double the estimated costs. It turns out that the Jones Act created a litigious environment here in South Texas and none of the dredging companies want to work here. Or if they do, in order to protect themselves from the cost of potential lawsuits of injured workers, they submit bids that reflect those costs.

We have taken advantage of GLO grants and the sand that blows into the right-of-way of Park Road 100 and have hauled large quantities of that sand to our beach; but 79,000 CY of sand, although it sounds like a lot, is just a drop in the bucket compared to the volumes necessary to make an impact. Consequently, the Town has not seen a good renourishment event since November of 2004, and our beaches are showing it.

In the meantime, the beach continues to erode, and we periodically find concrete and wood debris out on the beach on the north end that we hadn't seen before (out in front of The Villas of South Padre). A lot of that concrete happens to be what is left of retaining walls and homes that have long been removed. We are also noticing that the south end, near the jetties, which had historically been an accreting area is beginning to erode as well. Something must be taking place – either because of all the beach renourishments or because of the lack of beach renourishments - to change the beach dynamics.

The town comprises about 76% of the Point Isabel School District's tax base; about 73% of the Laguna Madre Water District's tax base; 22% of Texas Southmost College (UTB) tax base; and almost 16% of Cameron County tax base. So, should our beaches deteriorate to the extent that our land values are affected to any degree, the economic impact could be devastating to the region.

So what is the Town doing now?

1) We're looking for sand. No matter how much money you have, you can't do anything without the sand. We know about the sand from the Brazos Santiago Pass, and the sand in the right-of-way of Park Road 100, but we need more.

So our highlighted project is a study to find more sand. Since we believe the most likely locations to find sand is off-shore, we call this our Off-shore Sand Source project. The Town is working with the Texas General Land Office, the University of Texas at Austin, and a coastal engineering consulting firm to help us find that sand and put it on the beach.

We expect this project to take place in three phases:

- a) a preliminary desk-top study to research the geology and geomorphology of the area.
- b) Data collection focusing on areas found in the desk-top research.
- c) Construction – assuming we find beach-quality sand of similar size and mineralogy, we can put that sand on the beach.

2) We are working much more closely with the Port of Brownsville and the Texas General Land Office.

The Texas General Land Office (GLO) has provided the Town with good general advice, but also a great number of grant opportunities. The Coastal Division, especially, has helped the Town wade through the maze of bureaucracy necessary to get items reviewed and approved and has proactively encouraged and supported beach renourishment efforts of the Town and the county. The Town has actively lobbied the Texas legislature for more funding for the GLO specifically for beach maintenance, beach renourishment, and other beach-related funding opportunities. In return, the General Land Office is very helpful in providing advice and suggestions on grant applications the Town submits for our projects.

And the Town is working much more closely with the Port of Brownsville. Instead of waiting for the Port to dredge their channel, we now partner with the Port and travel to Washington to lobby for funding for the Port so they can dredge their channel. We use that opportunity to educate our legislators about our Beneficial Use of Dredge Material beach renourishment project as well as the economic impact that healthy beaches provide the local, state, and federal economies. We will continue to partner with the Port - that dredge project is vital to maintain the health and width of our beaches. And we will continue to ask you, ladies and gentlemen, for funding and legislative support for beach renourishment.

I guess the most important thing I can tell you is that no matter how well you think you plan for beach preservation, mother nature will always throw you a curve ball when you least expect it. In a matter of three years, the Town has gone from “Top Restored Beach” – with beautiful stable, wide beaches, to a state of near emergency in areas. Erosion can turn around and take place in a heart beat.

I have learned that the Town needs to be much more proactive in our efforts. And I am here before you today, asking your support to help us meet that goal and to partner with us to keep our beaches healthy – it impacts our local economy, but also the region’s economy.