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Tybee wants to bulldoze dunes

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Millions of dollars have been spent in the past 30 years to build up Tybee Island's dunes.

Now city officials are seeking a permit that would allow them to bulldoze a 20-foot road through some of the dunes closest to the water, just before another \$10.5 million is spent to add more sand to the beach.

The main reason given: public safety. Because the beach has eroded so badly in the past couple of years, emergency vehicles can't pass through at high tide.

"Basically what they are proposing to solve is a problem that will go away as soon as they get their renourishment," said Clark Alexander, professor of marine geology at the Skidaway Institute of Oceanography.

Renourishment is scheduled for November.

But space on the beach is needed now, especially between 12th and 16th streets, a spot dense with beachgoers on weekends.

"When you are trying to get through that area and someone's life is on the line, time is of the essence," said Tybee Fire Chief Skip Sasser.

The permit, if approved by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, involves more than just bulldozing some dunes.

It would allow Tybee to till hard sand to make it softer for turtle nesting, level out "scarp" so turtles can move about, and remove "wrack," which is the buildup of dead marsh grass.

It's a necessity because the island must till and level scarps - a small sand cliff formed by erosion that turtles can't get over - per an agreement with the Army Corps of Engineers, said Lou Off, president of Tybee's Beach Task Force, a council advisory committee. The task force endorsed the permit.

"It's not going to be a freeway down the beach. People are getting their knickers in a gather here for nothing, really," he said. "I don't like messing with the dunes, but in the case that we have right now it's

the only way. There is nothing here that will harm the beach. We are taking care of the turtles, man, we are taking care of the turtles."

The dunes at issue are called "frontier dunes," smaller than the primary dunes farther inland. But they are important, Alexander said, because they provide storm protection and are a turtle nesting habitat.

The timing

When public notice of the application hit the island last week, it got government gadflies talking. They were aghast that the documents requested bulldozing a 20-foot-wide road starting from the mean high-water mark. But after a few days, some started wondering whether the timing would render the permit moot.

Work on the dunes cannot be finished by the time the busy-beach season ends around Labor Day.

Public comment on the permit is open until July 5, at which point all comments are sent to Tybee officials for rebuttal. The matter could be up for a vote before the DNR's Shore Protection Committee sometime at the end of July or mid-August, but even that is unclear, said Karl Burgess of the DNR.

Then, if a permit is issued, Tybee would have to wait another 31 days before any work could begin, he said.

While turtle nesting season ends Oct. 31, Burgess said the permit doesn't preclude working before that time. However, the shore protection committee could put that stipulation on Tybee.

"At this time it's something that is irrelevant," said Mayor Jason Buelterman. "It's something that could come in handy down the road, but I think the governing body of the island should have an opportunity to review any plans because the dunes are such a precious commodity."

Mayor Pro Tem Wanda Doyle said she'd also like to be notified before city staff begins to bulldoze dunes. When she voted to make the application in February, she did not think a major road would be cut down the beach.

"The idea, I thought, was moving one or two of those dunes out front for public safety purposes only," she said. "I still don't think it's going to be a road."

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