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Tybee Island: Bust at the beach

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IT'S THE treehuggers vs. the sand bubbas on Tybee Island again.

And this time, chalk a big one up for the bubbas.

They're on a roll.

Unfortunately, it's a roll that could undermine Georgia's ocean playground by over-building and encroachment on its public beach.

Last Thursday, the Tybee City Council took a step in that short-sighted direction by repealing its Shore Protection Act and reducing the number of members on its Planning Commission from nine to seven. Both measures passed by identical 4-2 votes.

Prior to the two votes, the public had mostly suspicions that the council that took office after last November's general election was pro-encroachment and anti-planning. After all, the current council had a chance in June to fiddle with the local shoreline ordinance, which had been passed in 2001, but backed off.

Now, after Thursday's mugging of fair-minded development rules, those doubts have been removed.

Without local restrictions on growth and beach encroachment, Tybee will fall under the state's rules, which are more liberal.

That's good news for anyone who wants to build as close to the water as possible. But it's bad news for the public, which owns the beach and wants it to remain healthy, viable and around for future generations of Georgians to enjoy.

A second blow to the beach was the downsizing of the planning council. This appointed board has played

an important advisory role to the council, filtering out projects that it deems potentially harmful and serving as a useful sounding board. It also helps insulate the elected council from undue political heat.

Unfortunately, the pro-encroachment council wanted to stifle this source of informed opinion. The net effect will mean more politicization of questionable projects, not less - a fact not lost on Tybee Mayor Jason Buelterman.

"I don't understand why we are creating yet another divide" in our community, the mayor said. Here's the answer: Because they can. To the victors in last November's election go the spoils. Those goodies include scrapping local shoreline protection and weakening the planning board.

The council, however, also shot itself in both feet.

Mr. Buelterman has been a passionate missionary for Tybee's beach renourishment needs, traveling far and wide to spread the correct message that the island needs help to maintain its constantly eroding beach.

But if elected officials on Tybee vote for local measures that undermine that same beach, why should taxpayers kick in an extra dime for more sand? Sadly, future renourishment will be tougher to sell, and that's no day at the beach.

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