

Florida Specifier

Practical Information For Environmental Professionals

Florida coastal communities struggle to maintain coastal programs

By MICHAEL JENKINS, PhD, PE

Beaches are a critical asset to the state of Florida in terms of its economy, quality of life and environment. However, as with all government programs, Florida's robust coastal management programs are now facing unprecedented pressures at many levels.

Anecdotal reports suggest that there is still strong support for these programs within the state, though communities face greater challenges in sustaining them given the current economic downturn.

As local funding for coastal management programs is generally linked to local property values or tourist development taxes, impacts to both of these revenue sources have reduced available dollars.

"We have lost 10 to 15 percent of our property values and some of our resorts are shutting down. At the same time our program costs are going up," said Juan Florensa, public works director for the town of Longboat Key. "That's the quandary we are in."

Longboat Key is not alone in its concerns—many program officials have had to restructure their current plans to meet new fiscal realities.

One common strategy that is increasingly being used is a prioritization of planned projects and a deferment of project implementation based on available funds. This has led to an increased focus on existing, popular programs and a lowering of expectation for new or expanded projects.

"So far, major beach projects have somehow been able to sustain themselves despite the downturn," observed Debbie Flack, president of the Florida Shore and Beach Preservation Association, an organization dedicated to the protection of the state's beaches.

With this focus on existing projects, many communities are streamlining their programs to be in line with their economic realities.

Leanne Welch, environmental program

supervisor for Palm Beach County's Department of Environmental Resources Management, notes the following regarding her county's beach programs. "We are responsible for the effective use of public funds. We are cutting where we can and delaying projects to meet our budget constraints."

As the primary costs of beach projects are associated with construction and permitting, which generally requires years under normal circumstances, postponing projects is a viable short-term strategy for reducing expenditures. "Mostly we have delayed projects by a year or two, though permitting has also been a factor," said Welch.

While this approach can be used effectively, programs throughout the state have been assisted this year by a mild hurricane season and relatively low erosion conditions, limiting the immediate need for major projects in response to storm impacts.

Another result of the economic downturn has been an increased emphasis on cost-sharing opportunities. Both state and federal agencies have historically provided strong support to Florida's beach programs and there is increased interest in cost-sharing opportunities with the state.

This has resulted in a strong level of requests for cost sharing from the state for the 2010 funding cycle. Dedicated beach funding through the documentary stamp program, however, has been at an all-time low, though the legislature was able to provide partial funding for the state beach program through alternate funding sources for this year.

"I believe the fact that the legislature was able to find the money this year confirms their long-term commitment," said Flack.

Changes to the state assistance program are also in the works with a modified formulation for the ranking of beach projects currently under development by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Bureau of Beaches and Coastal Systems.

Coastal programs are monitoring these

proposed changes to the state ranking system as they may alter the priority ranking of projects and their ability to receive state cost share for their projects..

Federal projects continue, though over the past year only partial matching dollars have been available for beach projects. Local communities may still elect to construct under a federal reimbursable project structure, though the timing of reimbursement is not guaranteed and this approach requires up-front payment of the federal share by the local sponsor.

With increased demands on government resources, coastal managers have reiterated the need for public outreach regarding the value of their coastal programs and the necessity of prolonged program support. "We need to be sure that we explain to our residents the value of these programs in terms of storm protection for upland properties as well as the positive impacts to property values and our quality of life," advises Florensa.

While the extended economic outlook is uncertain, many coastal communities are hoping that the recent economic malaise will soon be over. "We are fortunate that we have a range of funding sources including local state and federal support. Hopefully, we are dealing with short-term funding issues and can get back on track in the long term," concludes Welch.

Public support for beaches remains strong and managers are committed to their programs.

Regardless of recent funding reductions and the need to prioritize and defer projects, the dedication to beaches within the state appears to be strong and programs are adapting to the changing economic climate.

"Beaches are key to our economic recovery," reiterates Flack. "I think the commitment is there from all parties."

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