

The Palm Beach Post

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Help beaches, help property: Feds right to reject Palm Beach County breakwaters.

By **THE PALM BEACH POST**

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Palm Beach County has been forced to abandon a misguided attempt to protect one small stretch of beachfront. The county's response should not be a glorified do-over.

The plan was to construct 11 breakwaters 200 feet offshore from Singer Island, the condo-studded oceanfront portion of Riviera Beach. Built of limestone and granite in about 12 feet of water, the breakwaters — starting at roughly Harbor Point Drive and spaced south for about a mile — were intended to keep beaches from eroding and protect the high-value condos whose residents vote in reliably high numbers. The Surfrider Foundation had opposed the project from the start, and two weeks ago the group's position was vindicated.

Federal agencies that must issue permits blasted the project, which would have cost between \$30 million and \$50 million, with the state paying 60 percent, the county 20 percent and Riviera Beach 20 percent. The Army Corps of Engineers concluded that the breakwaters as planned would have posed an "unacceptable risk" by blocking the flow of sand southward. Indeed, the impact on beaches to the south "appears to be woefully underestimated," and how the project might work was unclear. The corps also noted that the breakwaters could harm sea turtles and other marine life. They also would have posed problems for swimmers and boaters.

On March 31, Palm Beach County Department of Environmental Management Director Rich Walesky asked the corps to suspend the permit review. Mr. Walesky was acknowledging that the county couldn't succeed. But he asked for six months to seek "design alternatives." County Commissioner Karen Marcus, who represents Singer Island, said: "We have stepped back. We're looking at doing something farther from shore, perhaps in phases."

Commissioner Marcus worries that because state money for the project has gone unused for several years, the county might lose it. Any work would have to start in November and finish by March, before sea turtle nesting season. But Ericka D'Avanzo, regional director for the Surfrider Foundation — "dedicated to the protection and enjoyment of the world's oceans, waves and beaches for all people, through conservation, activism, research and education" — had a better point when she said in an e-mail that the county should not use "horselike blinders" to fix "individual segments" but consider how sand moves along the entire beach. The county, Ms. D'Avanzo said, could improve the flow of sand past the Jupiter Inlet — these navigational inlets cause much of the problem in the first place — and focus on smaller projects.

Surfrider successfully opposed a water treatment plant in Lake Worth whose discharge would have harmed a pristine reef. Surfrider successfully challenged in court a shortsighted beach restoration plan in Palm Beach. Those times, as now, the group focuses on the key point: Florida's beaches and inshore waters are public assets. No one wants to see the worst alternative off Singer Island: a line of seawalls, since the structures would prevent turtles from nesting. Before the condos seek that last-resort option, Palm Beach County should find a better alternative.

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