

Beach, turtle needs collide

By [Craig Pittman](#), Times staff writer

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SINGER ISLAND — More than a dozen condominiums line the beaches of Singer Island, their windows offering a sweeping view of the Atlantic Ocean near Palm Beach. But because of beach erosion, the ocean has recently gotten too close for comfort.

So two prominent Florida politicians — state Senate President Jeff Atwater, R-North Palm Beach, and U.S. Rep. Ron Klein, D-Boca Raton — have been prodding state and federal officials to approve a \$30-million taxpayer-funded project to build 11 rock walls about 200 feet off Singer Island's beach.

The walls, known as a breakwater, will not stop the erosion, only slow it down, according to Palm Beach County officials sponsoring the project. But biologists fear the breakwater would stop something else: nesting by endangered sea turtles.

Singer Island, which protrudes farther into the Atlantic than any other part of Florida's coastline, is one of the best places in the state for loggerhead, hawksbill and green sea turtles to lay their eggs. The breakwater "would have significant impacts on migration to and from the beach by adult and hatchling sea turtles," state wildlife officials warned in a letter.

However, political considerations may outweigh the environmental impact, according to internal e-mails from the state Department of Environmental Protection and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission obtained by the *St. Petersburg Times*.

In one March e-mail, a state biologist warned a colleague that "there is extreme pressure being put on to get this permit approved ASAP despite considerable concern" over turtle nesting.

Atwater has long been the breakwater's biggest champion.

"He's been onsite quite often, meeting with the residents and meeting with the DEP," said Dan Bates, director of Palm Beach County's environmental enhancement and restoration division.

"Oh, he's been wonderful," said Marie Bianchini, 54, a Singer Island resident.

Bates said Klein, the congressman, has played a crucial role in "helping with the federal permitting issues, as far as doing follow-up to see how they're coming along."

Atwater, now running for state chief financial officer, and Klein did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

The politicians are pushing the breakwater so hard because everyone in Palm Beach County supports it,

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Mrs. Bianchini said, "except a few — pardon my expression — wackadoos who like sea turtles. ... I'm for environmental causes, but we're on the top of the chain, right?"

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Geologists call barrier islands "dynamic." They are constantly moving as they erode in one place and build back up in another. Singer Island's beach has been losing about 15 feet a year since 2001, but the dunes where it might have built back are covered with concrete.

During one recent storm, Mrs. Bianchini said she was convinced that her condo was about to topple into the ocean: "That sucker was going down."

Some condos were built near the shoreline even as older buildings nearby were obviously teetering on the edge of disaster. Despite the risks, though, and the recent economic slump, condo units are still being listed at a half-million dollars and up.

To protect this valuable real estate, Palm Beach County has repeatedly sunk millions of dollars into rebuilding the beach only to see the sand washed away. Thus, the long-term solution: Dump huge boulders into the water to create a series of walls, each about 100 feet wide and 300 feet long.

The 3,000-foot-long breakwater is supposed to break the waves, slowing erosion. But a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers analysis noted that a breakwater built off another Palm Beach County shoreline "did not function as intended but accelerated erosion over much of the project area." Another, near Miami, "caused severe erosion south of the project."

Nearly 40 percent of the cost would be paid by the state, the rest by local government. The Surfrider Foundation, which successfully sued to block another beach project nearby, says that's not fair to the taxpayers.

"It's a project that only benefits a few buildings," said Surfrider's Ericka D'Avanzo.

Those buildings lie in Atwater's legislative district. As president of the Florida Senate, he wields tremendous clout over state agencies' budgets.

In 2006, when Palm Beach County asked for a DEP permit for the breakwater, the chief of that DEP division notified the agency's head about it because of "recent discussions with Senator Atwater."

In May 2007, after a tropical storm's waves battered Singer Island's beaches, Atwater took top DEP officials to see the damage first-hand.

"Our short-term goal is to get dune restoration going so that you have that first line of defense," he declared then. "The long-term answer is a breakwater that preserves and protects the beach."

Three months ago, aides for Atwater and Klein met with state and federal regulators to talk about how to speed up the breakwater's permits.

"The aides were frustrated at how long these things would take," said sea turtle biologist Blair Witherington, who attended.

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State and federal officials promised they were pushing the permits along as fast as possible — so much so, Witherington said, "there's a lot of worry that details are being glossed over and concerns are being ignored."

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Volunteers documented more than 1,200 sea turtle nests on Singer Island in 2007. Witherington called it "one of the most important nesting beaches in Florida."

Sea turtles return to the same beach year after year to nest, but studies have shown that breakwaters block their access.

"Breakwaters commonly occur off sea turtle nesting beaches in Japan," corps officials wrote. Research "has shown a substantial decrease in nesting in the area of the breakwater."

County officials contend Singer Island's turtles will either find a way through the walls' gaps or shift to other beaches. However, wildlife experts say that even if some turtles do manage to get through and lay eggs, the breakwater will make it easier for predators to pick off hatchlings returning to the sea — another blow to the declining population.

Florida Atlantic University biologist Jeanette Wyneken predicted humans may face a greater risk than turtles from the dark rocks sticking 2 to 3 feet above the waves.

"I'm just waiting to see how many boats they catch," she said.

Times researchers Caryn Baird and Carolyn Edds contributed to this report.

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