

SPECIAL REPORT



Part four of a four-part series on Florida's eroding beaches

BEACH RENOURISHMENT

Funds hard to come by

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After Hurricane Matthew devoured more than a mile of State Road A1A's asphalt and the sandy earth below in October, it was clear that help didn't come soon enough for Flagler County.

For more than a decade, the oceanfront communities of Painter's Hill, Beverly Beach and Flagler Beach watched as the Atlantic Ocean took more of their coast each year. Flagler County didn't have enough of its own money to fix the problem. And the county couldn't rely on Florida's beach renourishment program run by the Department of Environmental Protection to provide enough help.

So for more than 14 years, Flagler's leaders tried to prove the county worthy of a 50-year partnership with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that promised nearly \$25 million to protect their coast.

In September, Flagler leaders got word from Congress that money could start flowing as early as next year.

But it wasn't soon enough. A week later, Matthew plowed a path up Florida's coast, focusing much of its destruction on hundreds of miles of vulnerable beaches, and singling out stretches like Flagler that long have been ignored.

Without even making landfall in Florida, Matthew exposed weaknesses in the state's beach renourishment program that coastal advocates and state leaders argue must be fixed.

After years of renegeing on promises to help rebuild shrinking shores, the state's lack of investment in beaches can mean greater costs later for communities left to repair storm damage. Some state leaders are calling for at least \$50 million a year to renourish beaches as nearly half of Florida's vulnerable sandy shores are declared critically eroded because wildlife habitat, recreation or development is threatened.

Florida's reliance on federal money means some communities will wait a decade or more for help renourishing shores. Beaches that don't qualify are left to fight over scraps in a budget drained by state contributions to federal projects. Shore advocates and some lawmakers believe the problem can be solved by changing how communities that don't qualify for federal support are treated and providing more state money.

The ranking system used to divvy up what little state beach money is offered penalizes some communities that need help and focuses more on a year-by-year selection process instead of a long-term plan. One lawmaker wants to change the way DEP ranks projects worthy of state help and another is proposing a long-term spending plan for beaches similar to Florida's five-year roads plan.

Because the state follows — and doesn't lead — beach renourishment efforts, communities are left to fend for themselves in the competition for money and don't collaborate to reduce costs. Some advocates and local leaders argue

"Beaches are incredibly important to the economic viability of the state,"

— Rep. Ben Albritton, R-Wauchula

more cooperation could save millions and help rebuild more beaches.

Florida needs a strong, focused program with enough money to help protect its 825 miles of sandy shores visited each year by millions of tourists who generate billions for the state budget, beach advocates said.

"Beaches are incredibly important to the economic viability of the state," said Rep. Ben Albritton, R-Wauchula. "Having a solid beach program that keeps our beaches in good working order, proper working order, is important to make sure that our tourists are here, to make sure our tourist development dollars, our revenue stays whole."

For Debbie Flack, DEP's first beach program director, it's been painful to watch Florida leaders back off earlier commitments to coastal protection.

"I love this program," said Flack, who now leads a state beach advocacy group. "But it is not the nationally recognized program that we got our reputation on, because we are not funding it and we are not managing it as we once did."

Winners and losers

As they spent more than a decade wading through the slow and complex process of requesting federal help, Flagler County leaders faced another cumbersome process: the scoring system DEP uses to rank beaches seeking state support.

Nearly every year between 2010 and 2016, Flagler leaders asked the state to help pay for a feasibility study to get their beach on the federal list, with requests each year ranging from \$120,000 to \$338,000. All they received was about \$25,000 in 2013.

DEP decides how local beach projects rank for state support by assigning projects up to 115 points among 29 criteria. Because two-thirds of the requests each year for state support don't score high enough, a point or two can determine whether a community receives beach renourishment money.

Some county and state leaders criticize DEP's ranking system as unreliable and flawed because of how projects are prioritized.

"By and large, I don't think the best projects always get funding," said Gary McAlpin, Collier County's coastal zone manager.

The ranking system favors big projects over smaller ones, focuses more on projects that receive federal money, rewards stretches of beach previously renourished and ignores communities that can't afford to match state dollars.

"My feeling is it's an unfair scoring system," said Steven Parkinson, the public works director for Hallandale Beach in Broward County. "There's no way I can compete with the larger communities that have extensive beaches."

County beach managers also say the ranking process uses erosion data that doesn't take into

account current conditions. After Hurricane Sandy in 2012 washed out a stretch of State Road A1A in Broward County, DEP decided the area didn't deserve points for erosion despite a long history of documented problems. In fact, DEP claimed the beach grew when other reports showed erosion in an area designated worthy of federal support to renourish.

"It's hard to tell a city that had a road fall into the ocean that they don't have erosion," said Nicole Sharp, Broward's beach program manager.

The ranking process also undervalues the economic impact of beaches by ignoring the tax revenue they provide to a community, according to a December 2014 report by the Florida Legislature's research division.

The concerns with DEP's ranking system have made county leaders and legislators skeptical of the annual list prioritizing beaches for state support.

"I can't say I have a lot of confidence in how the list is produced," said state Rep. George Moraitis, R-Fort Lauderdale.

Albritton proposed changes to address concerns about ranking projects, but lawmakers rejected his bill earlier this year.

"I consider this a good starting place," Albritton said. "If it's a work in progress over the next few years, that's OK. I'm willing to keep working on it."

Political influence

Albritton's plan would affect the way DEP ranks projects, but not the way lawmakers ultimately decide where beach money goes. Most years they specify projects in the budget law that will be funded, often following DEP's priority list. But some years, like 2014, they changed the list's order to fund other projects, like beaches damaged by storms.

Top legislative leaders have benefited from the funding process they control, allowing them to bring limited taxpayer beach renourishment dollars back to coastal communities they serve, according to a Naples Daily News analysis of spending. In the last four years, one-third of the state money lawmakers approved for beaches — \$52 million of the \$149.5 million — went to the five counties represented by former House Speaker Steve Crisafulli of Merritt Island and incoming Senate President Joe Negron of Stuart.

The two lawmakers said



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Kevin O'Connor, of Long Beach, New York, surveys a section of State Road A1A damaged by erosion after Hurricane Matthew passed the east coast of Florida in October 2016. O'Connor said he owns two homes in Flagler Beach and came down to try to protect his investments. "If this were a direct hit we wouldn't be standing here. Twenty or 30 years ago when I first started coming here, the beach was way deep, but now, the last ten years after those other storms, there is nothing left," said O'Connor.

they are proud to help their communities with state money.

Crisafulli said DEP's list of beach projects is not "the final arbiter." Lawmakers should have a say, but it's not politics, he said. "I wouldn't say politics. I would say the push by local communities to lay out their case, the push by members (of the Legislature) to make their case," Crisafulli said.

Santa Rosa County, frustrated over the lack of state support it was receiving, hired a lobbyist to fight for money in the budget, and it paid off with \$8.4 million over the past two years to renourish the Panhandle's Navarre Beach.

"In the last two legislative sessions we brought more money back from Tallahassee than at any time in Santa Rosa County history," County Commissioner Rob Williamson said. "We have a lobbyist and I've been to Tallahassee 12 times in the last 18 months."

One model Florida could look to is its own road plan, said Sen. Jack Latvala, R-St. Petersburg, the incoming chairman of the Senate appropriations committee.

Latvala wants to make beach funding more predictable, like road funding.

Florida for decades has used a five-year plan for road projects, which start with local metropolitan planning organizations and work their way to a regional Department of Transportation district.

"The structure has given order to a complex process, and should be an example for beaches," Latvala said.

"You get things on the five-year plan, they move and they get done," Latvala said. "And everybody understands they're going to get done."

Gov. Rick Scott said the state should have a plan for how to spend beach



A section of Alligator Drive in Alligator Point, Fla. sits damaged on Sept. 2, 2016 after storm erosion from Hurricane Hermine.

money before it dedicates funding.

"My experience has been you get way more done if you can show people sort of a path forward," he said.

Latvala, the incoming Senate appropriations chairman who lists beaches as one of his top two priorities, said he wants at least \$50 million a year for renourishment.

"There is no doubt in my mind the impact of beaches on our Florida economy," he said. "They kind of define Florida. I mean, who goes to Texas to go to the beach?"

Latvala said he will look for a new source for state beach money to ensure they are properly funded.

Not working together

Florida communities could save money if they collaborated on beach projects, but DEP does little to encourage it.

"We do discuss with our local sponsors opportunities for regionalization,

but as the cost-sharing partner, it's really up to the local sponsor to coordinate those regionalization efforts," said Alex Reed, the state's Beach Management Funding Assistance Program administrator.

The price of delivering an offshore dredge and pipeline, often from another part of the country, isn't cheap. Communities could save millions by setting up a dredge once for two or more projects.

Great Lakes Dock & Dredge Vice President Bill Hanson estimated the cost of setting up one dredge between \$2 million and \$5 million. "Miami-Dade spent \$7.5 million for one project," said Brian Flynn, the county's retired coastal projects manager.

"The best way to cut costs and help more beaches is to find ways to collaborate," Hanson said.

"There are no hard and fast numbers to apply," he said. "There are certainly significant cost savings to be realized."

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