GUEST OPINION BY COMMISSIONER RAY JUDAH
SCHILLING REBUTTAL
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In his recent commentary concerning beach renourishment for Fort Myers Beach, Frank Schilling attempted to trivialize and distort the design and scope of the project.

To begin with, beach renourishment projects are typically needed along coastlines to protect structures such as buildings, roads and utilities built too close to the water's edge. A natural beach maintains a stable beach profile where the normal cyclical pattern of sand deposition from the long shore current parallel to the shoreline, and inshore and offshore sand exchange is not disturbed by development and shoreline hardening structures such as groins and seawalls.

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection Bureau of Beach and Coastal Systems identified the segment of Estero Island from Matanzas Pass to Sterling Avenue as a critically eroded beach. As with Captiva Island and Gasparilla Island, the Estero Island beach renourishment project received federal authorization providing significant federal cost share to fund the project. In fact, of the $10.5 million total cost estimate to renourish approximately 4.7 miles of beach, the overall cost share includes 63% federal, 17% state and 20% local (County bed tax and Town). Under current cost share allocations the Town of Fort Myers Beach cost share would be $650,000, approximately 6% of the $10.5 million project.

Beach renourishment is widely accepted by federal, state and local regulatory agencies and coastal engineers in the scientific community as the preferred alternative to shoreline hardening structures in protecting and maintaining beaches along developed coastlines. An enhanced beach profile absorbs the energy of waves minimizing damage to the built and natural environment, while shoreline hardening structures compound erosion by deflecting wave energy downward and outward resulting in scouring and loss of sand material from the beach.

A quick search on the internet reveals a plethora of beach renourishment projects along the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean that demonstrate the importance of beach renourishment providing protection of private and public property during major storm events as well as enhancing property and environmental value.

A review of the public record pertaining to correspondence between Lee County Natural Resources staff and the Fort Myers Beach Town Council reveals numerous examples across the state of Florida including Pinellas and Brevard Counties, City of Cocoa Beach, City of Cape Canaveral, and Lover's Key where beach renourishment projects provided storm protection to upland property and structures.

An essential component of beach renourishment projects is the establishment of beach dune vegetation to minimize loss of sand to wind and wave erosion. Vegetation reduces wind speed, causing sand to accumulate and roots bind the sand to stabilize the beach and enhance drainage. Well drained dunes are critical for the protection of sea turtle eggs subjected to periodic flooding from rain and high tide.

There is an unfortunate misconception by some members of the public that a beach dune vegetation system eliminates open beach for recreational use and obstructs a person's view from their residential home or condominium. Unlike the beach dune systems in the northeast and along the west coast of the United States, the dunes along the gulf coast of Florida exhibit a low profile. Furthermore, beach dune vegetation is typically located on the backside of the beach area away from the open beach above the shoreline. Beach dune vegetation can be properly managed using appropriate horticultural practices, selection of low growing plants and ground cover and proper placement of dune walkovers to prevent trampling by pedestrian and traffic. It should be noted that the mangrove community established around the lagoon along the shoreline on Little Estero Island is not a beach dune system.

Beach dune habitat is critical for a variety of wildlife including migratory birds such as the threatened snowy and piping plovers, ghost and fiddler crabs, and yes, even non-venomous snakes such as the black racer and coachwhip that control rodents attracted to dwellings built along the beach.

Contrary to Mr. Schilling's allegations concerning the two independent engineering studies by Coastal Engineering Consultant, Inc. (CEC) and Applied Technology & Management (ATM), their findings do not refute the need or importance of beach renourishment on Fort Myers Beach.

In fact, in their assessment of the Estero Island shoreline, CEC was not asked to validate the project design. By their own admission, the CEC maps did not account for over 800,000 cubic yards of sand placed on northern Estero Island from previous channel maintenance dredging projects.

ATM will soon be finalizing their written report but have already made a presentation supporting the fact that the proposed beach renourishment project for Fort Myers Beach incorporates sound engineering principals and that the nominal cost share by the Town of Fort Myers Beach make the project financially attractive. In their report ATM further states that the installation of a beach dune system would provide an additional level of protection for Estero Island.

All other beach renourishment projects in Lee County, including Bonita Beach, Gasparilla Island, Captiva and Lover's Key included a beach dune vegetation system to protect upland property and structures.

An article in the News-Press on July 10, 2007 indicated that "if the Town of Fort Myers Beach chooses not to restore its beaches, it could lose out on future FEMA emergency money designed to rebuild the beach".

Fort Myers Beach should not be held hostage to the baseless rhetoric of Mr. Schilling but learn of the benefits and importance of implementing a comprehensive beach management plan to enhance the safety and quality of life of the beach community.