

Savannah Morning News: Letters to the Editor

Tuesday – February 28, 2017

Petrea's bill would hurt Georgia's coast

When the Shore Protection Act (SPA) became law in 1979, it was heralded as an iconic piece of legislation. The preamble to the SPA demonstrates how the sand sharing system acts as a buffer to protect real and personal property from damaging natural events and granted the state the power to establish a jurisdictional area so development is managed wisely.

I guess Georgia's coastal representatives didn't read the SPA when they co-sponsored Representative Jesse Petrea's ill-conceived amendment to the Act, H.B. 271. Otherwise, I can't imagine why they cosigned it. HB 271 essentially guts the SPA by changing the jurisdictional area to a tiny narrow a strip of land. Even more unbelievable, the bill redefines "sand dunes." If the bill becomes law, Georgia would have the distinction of being the only state whose sand dunes consist only of mounds of sand with sparse native vegetation. Those nice big, long rolling dune fields ... not dunes anymore. Landscape those sparsely vegetated dunes and presto — they aren't dunes either. That's a pretty handy trick for developers wanting to maximize building space and not caring about its deleterious effects.

Sounds a little crazy? Where is this going and why?

Petrea claims the amendment protects "property rights," really? Whose property rights does HB 271 protect? Not the vast majority of residents whose property is at risk if barrier island dune systems deteriorate and cease to perform their protective function for inland properties during times of extreme tides and weather events.

Does Petrea really think that making a property rights argument for a handful of oceanfront homeowners is worth the risk to the vast majority of property owners?

Well, maybe there is more to the push for HB 271 than meets the eye. Let's play connect the dots starting with the Sea Island Spit. Sea Island Acquisitions, anxious to sell eight, multimillion dollar lots on the fragile Spit (made even more fragile by Hurricane Matthew) had their attorney and lobbyist attend committee hearings for the bill. Why? The bill, narrowing the jurisdictional area, and elimination of pesky sand dunes from jurisdictional consideration will make the Spit project more attractive to potential buyers.

A conspiracy theory? Well, I guess the Sea Island attorney, Patricia Barmeyer, and lobbyist, Jerry Keen could have been there just for fun. Who knows?

MINDY EGAN
Jekyll Island

Sunday – February 6, 2017

Lawmaker: My bill offers more coastline protection

I am the sponsor of House Bill 271, an amendment to the Shoreline Protection Act of 1979, and it is co-sponsored by all of the legislators representing the coast of Georgia. The bill's purpose is to bring uniformity and predictability to property owners and regulators alike. It is being attacked for supposedly reducing the jurisdictional line from 50 feet to 25 feet.

That is not true. There is no 50-foot jurisdictional line. There exists no such line based on distance from the dunes. The bill simply establishes a boundary of 25 feet from the most landward dune. If there is no dune, the 25 feet is measured from the stabilization structure, which typically is Johnson rock or a sea wall. In the rare instance where there are neither dunes nor structure, the measure would be 25 feet from the ordinary high water mark.

Meanwhile, the current method of measuring, which almost everyone agrees makes no sense, continues to regulate many private properties that are far removed from the dunes and should not be located within the zone. The method is based on "the presence of a 20 foot or taller native tree and/or a pre-1979 habitable structure." This nonsensical method is actually leaving entire dune systems unprotected while overly burdening private property owners.

H.B.271 also creates a "minor activity" category to speed up the review process and reduce the regulatory burden on property owners seeking minor alterations such as decks, patios and landscaping, and it allows for the transfer of permits to new owners.

Georgia has the best protected coast in the United States today and the cleanest water quality on the Eastern seaboard.

My bill is even more protective of the coast than what we have today. Many environmental groups understand that and thus support the legislation. The Georgia Conservancy is among the supporters. Critics are allowing the perfect to be the enemy of the good.

JESSE PETREA

State Representative

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Savannah