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A standoff over sand

A state beach project requires more public access, but in Loveladies and North Beach, it's meeting some resistance.

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LOVELADIES, N.J. - Signs dotting driveways along Long Beach Boulevard here and in neighboring North Beach appear to welcome visitors with cute names such as Ladybug Lane, High Dune and Scammellott.

But unless you happen to own one of the multimillion-dollar beach houses, forget about going to the beach here.

Because even though, technically, the sand and the surf are open to anyone, stern warnings such as "PRIVATE PROPERTY," "NO BEACH ACCESS," and "DO NOT ENTER" posted among the quaint signs make it clear that you'd be trespassing to get to the beach in Loveladies and North Beach.

And even if you managed to find one of only two public access points in the towns, it's likely you'd have a hard time parking your car. The single roadway in this part of the island sports more than its share of "NO STOPPING OR STANDING" and "NO PARKING" signs all along its length.

Now, with those who own these expensive homes standing firmly against the not-so-rich who want a day at the beach, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection has moved in with a threat:

Unless those 600 homeowners sign agreements that for some include allowing the state to take sections of their properties for paths to the beach, a \$71 million project to restore sand on much of Long Beach Island's oceanfront could be in jeopardy.

Beach replenishment projects have been undertaken up and down the Jersey Shore for years. This would be the first to rebuild Long Beach Island, which lost much of its beachfront in a storm 44 years ago.

To qualify for the beach restoration, the state requires beach access points every quarter-mile and public restrooms every half-mile. It also wants Long Beach Township to create 200 more parking spaces for beachgoers.

Complying with state and federal regulations isn't much of a problem in the island's other municipalities - Ship Bottom, Beach Haven, Surf City and Harvey Cedars - where officials and residents for the most part are eager to see sand replenishment.

In most Jersey Shore beach towns, people find parking and paths to the beach at what are familiarly called "street ends," where side streets dead-end at the beachfront.

Loveladies and North Beach lost their street ends after the 1962 nor'easter that washed 600 Long Beach Island homes out to sea.

When the sand settled, the island had become so narrow between Surf City and Barnegat Light that when

Loveladies and North Beach were redeveloped, the properties were divided in a contiguous line along the beach and bay fronts, with only one road running parallel to the water. The side streets that ran from the ocean to the bay are no more.

It's a situation that has prevented people such as Marika Jones, 37, a fine-arts student and part-time hip-hop musician who lives in Manhattan and spends part of every summer in Barnegat Light, from ever setting foot on the sands of neighboring Loveladies.

"I can drive through it, but I can't park there," Jones said. "To me, it feels like they are trying to keep the riffraff out by making it impossible to use their beach."

Sol Eckstein, a retired engineer from Exton who owns a house on the bay in North Beach, agreed.

"I have a bay-front house, but to go to the beach, I have to get in my car and drive six blocks down to Harvey Cedars to park and get access. My neighbors across the street here won't let me cut across their driveway to get to a beach that is 50 yards from my house," Eckstein said. "It's ridiculous that my taxes pay for their beach, but I can't use it."

State officials say the sand replenishment project is a chance to respond to complaints like Eckstein's.

In 2005, the state Supreme Court ruled that the public was entitled to have access to a privately owned section of beach in Wildwood Crest known as Diamond Beach after its owners tried to impose a \$700-a-year beach tag fee. The court said the DEP - not property owners - had the right to set reasonable beach fees. It also said the owners had to open a three-foot-wide path to the water at no charge to beachgoers.

"Clearly, in doing this project, we're trying to make all the beaches on Long Beach Island as accessible to the public as possible, since we're spending public funds to replenish them," said David Rosenblatt, administrator of the DEP's office of engineering and construction.

Sixty-five percent of the funding for the replenishment project will come from the federal government, and the rest is being paid by the state.

Before it starts work, the DEP needs about 800 easements from property owners in Long Beach Township, Harvey Cedars, Surf City, Ship Bottom and Beach Haven.

That's not going to be easy in Loveladies and North Beach, according to Long Beach Township Mayor DiAnne Gove.

"Here, there clearly are lines drawn in the sand over this," Gove said. "People have a lot of issues with a lot of the parts of this plan. And they're not signing over easements easily."

Long Beach Township so far has obtained only 40 of the 600 signatures it needs, Gove said.

Meanwhile, homeowners in Ship Bottom and Surf City - where beach access has never been an issue and where residents seem hungry for sand to be pumped onto their malnourished beaches - have nearly all signed easements.

If all the homeowners in Ship Bottom and Surf City sign easements by the end of the summer, the beach replenishment project could begin in those towns as early as the fall, Rosenblatt said.

In Long Beach Township, it's another story.

Parking spaces and beach access paths abound in some southern sections of the township, but there are still fewer than two dozen public parking spaces in Loveladies and North Beach. There's almost no place there to use a public restroom. And there are only two places to get to the beach without trespassing on private property, Rosenblatt said.

Loveladies and North Beach homeowners aren't exactly embracing the state's demands for more beach access.

"We know we need beach replenishment, but we're concerned about the strings that come attached to it. And, I think, rightfully so," North Beach homeowner Arthur Schwerzel said.

Katherine Chance of New York City, whose family has owned a house in Loveladies since the 1970s, said she worried about "strangers traipsing all over" her beachfront property if more access paths were created.

"People are going to think you can just park or walk anywhere," Chance said. "Our signs keep most people off our property, but over the years, once in a while we've come home and found a strange car parked in the driveway and strangers using the beach out front. The beach is public, but my yard and driveway are not."

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