

## Don't ease up on easements

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If the sight of beachfront homes dangerously perched on unsupported pilings in the wake of the weekend nor'easter failed to inspire reluctant Long Beach Island property owners to sign easements to allow a sand replenishment project to proceed, we don't know what will.

But we are certain of one thing: Not one cent of taxpayer money should be expended on building back their beaches until all the easements have been signed.

The homeowners are risking a \$71 million beach restoration project if they don't agree to grant the easements needed to begin work and to allow public beach access. The taxpayers of Long Beach Township recently shelled out \$150,000 to rebuild a dune protecting just two homes — a stretch of about 100 yards. It's unfair to ask the township's taxpayers to keep bailing out a few homeowners, and to spend millions more in state and federal taxpayer dollars to shore up miles of beaches the rest of the public will be blocked from enjoying.

To date, only about 50 of 600 oceanfront property owners in Long Beach Township have signed easements. If the others continue to refuse to sign them, let them be responsible for trucking in the sand needed to protect their homes — at their own expense. Having to cough up a few hundred thousand dollars after each storm might help change their minds.

The weekend snowstorm, and a milder storm less than two weeks earlier, left wood stilts supporting several multimillion-dollar homes exposed, as protective dunes were demolished by waves. Long Beach Township officials approved emergency appropriations — \$150,000 each time — to rebuild the decimated dunes. About \$350,000 worth of sand was trucked to that same beach less than two years ago.

Property owners trying to rally support for not signing easements have a Feb. 26 meeting with a lawyer to determine how they can force modifications in the replenishment schedule. Beach Haven Mayor Deborah Whitcraft said homeowners who don't sign easements "are in denial."

If easements are signed and a home is destroyed, the owner can rebuild, Whitcraft said. If the town is forced to resort to eminent domain to acquire part of the property for an easement, the homeowner will no longer own that portion, which may make the lot too small to be buildable if the home is destroyed. Hopefully, that message will sink in. If it doesn't, officials should make it clear that homeowners will be solely responsible for replenishing the beach facing their homes.

Before the two storms, Rep. H. James Saxton, R-N.J., asked the state Department of Environmental Protection to back off on its insistence that access points be provided every quarter mile. That would serve only one group: Wealthy homeowners who want to keep the public off the public beaches that back up to their homes. Damage left by the two storms, and the \$300,000 needed to protect homes on a small section of beach, provide further evidence of how irresponsible that position is. The DEP should continue to reject Saxton's request. And Saxton should begin convincing homeowners they will end up the losers if they insist on viewing the beaches as their private preserve.

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