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LBI sand project hangs on DEP order

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The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection has increased its requirements for municipalities that want to take part in the Long Beach Island beach-replenishment project.

State officials said Wednesday that they are requiring municipalities to provide public restrooms every quarter-mile for the length of the island.

The DEP also is mandating that Long Beach Township provide more public parking in the ultra-exclusive Loveladies and North Beach sections of town. The location of the additional parking lots is not yet decided.

Meanwhile, at least one mayor criticized the DEP Wednesday for jeopardizing the project's funding with its additional demands.

"I think we're being held hostage by the DEP," said Ship Bottom Mayor William Huelsenbeck. "It's going to get to the point where the money is going to flow out of Congress down to Louisiana and bypass New Jersey if we keep fooling around on issues not even related to sand replenishment."

The U.S. government is funding the Long Beach Island Project, a more than 50-year plan to replenish and maintain the beaches of Long Beach Island. The DEP has made no formal commitment of funding to the project, according to federal officials.

The DEP's role is that of a "local partner" for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, according to the office of U.S. Rep. Jim Saxton, R-3rd.

It is customary for the federal government to have a local partner with local expertise for such projects, said Jeff Sagnip Hollendonner, a Saxton spokesman.

But the DEP has made a big splash, despite its apparent secondary role in the process.

The U.S. government requires that towns receiving federal funding for beach replenishment provide public access points every half-mile. The rule, officials said, is to prevent the appearance that public tax dollars are going for the upkeep of private beaches.

But the DEP said early on that it would not settle for half-mile access points. It demanded access points every quarter-mile.

The quarter-mile demand is a major sticking point to gaining the cooperation of oceanfront homeowners, local officials have conceded. Thus far only a small fraction of the homeowners from which federal authorities need permission to begin work have agreed to the plan. Their reluctance has raised the specter of eminent domain.

Asked Wednesday whether he thought it would come to that, Dave Rosenblatt, the DEP's pointman for the project, replied, "I don't know." Surf City Mayor Leonard Connors predicted the use of eminent domain Tuesday.

Now the DEP is making additional demands, these involve public parking and restrooms.

Rosenblatt said the DEP informed local officials of the public bathroom and parking guidelines the second

week in December.

He added that only Loveladies and North Beach are deficient in terms of public parking. The rest of the island is up to speed.

Rosenblatt said that portable toilets would satisfy the DEP's demands for public bathrooms.

But it's not likely to be a popular idea.

Ship Bottom's Huelsenbeck said the borough installed public bathrooms about 15 years ago, trailer-like modules trucked up to the beach.

"Residents in the area complained so much we had them removed," the mayor recalled. "We had them ... on 11th Street and I believe somewhere along 26th Street. It actually was before the time I was in office."

More recently, Huelsenbeck said, a borough councilman proposed using Community Development Block Grant money to purchase portable toilets. Residents again protested the idea. It was dropped.

Surf City Mayor Leonard Connors said he also experimented with the idea of public bathrooms more than 20 years ago but met similar resistance.

"I had proposed them and put them out in my (regular) letter to the public with a little information," Connors said. "I asked for their response and they gave it to me. The public didn't like it. I got mail from people who opposed it. They thought it would be a gathering point for transients on their way to Harvey Cedars and Barnegat Light."

Connors had proposed the restrooms - he described them as more permanent structures than portable toilets - at the bay beach on 17th Street, at the public boat ramp and at the previously vacant area that is now the site of Veterans Memorial Park.

The DEP said it is doing what it believes is right.

"We have a responsibility to provide these services to the public that use these beaches in exchange for the public funding that these municipalities are going to receive," Rosenblatt said on Wednesday.

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