

New refit plan for Broadkill Beach

Plan poses risk for horseshoe crabs

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Sand continues to erode away after being trucked into Broadkill Beach to replenish the dune line. A larger replenishment will be delayed and redesigned after a first round of bidding drew no proposals. / CHUCK SNYDER/SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL

State regulators have loosened some environmental restrictions for a federal widening of vulnerable Broadkill Beach, after a more-traditional Army Corps of Engineers contract offer failed to attract any bidders earlier this year.

Revised permit terms include an allowance for dredging and beach replenishment work at Broadkill through the spring of 2015, at a time when Delaware Bay shorelines are normally closed to dredging to protect spawning horseshoe crabs.

Completion could come as late as early spring of 2016, some two years later than hoped, set amid worries that the next coastal storm could spell disaster for some bayside homeowners..

“What we’re trying to do is balance the benefits with some impact [on horseshoe crabs], and trying to minimize the potential impact from the project,” said David Small, Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control deputy secretary. He added that contract terms may include provisions for relocating crabs that come ashore during critical periods.

David Carter, conservation chairman for Delaware Audubon, called DNREC’s approach “deeply concerning” and “highly irresponsible” because of ties between horseshoe crab spawning and the migratory, endangered red knot shorebird. Although Broadkill is not considered a major crab spawning destination, each year’s egg-laying helps the troubled population, Carter said.

“To dredge through the season will smother a large part of the population,” Carter said. “Also, the fine sand will likely reduce spawning even further,” as the beach work proceeds.

Carter also questioned approval for “economic loading,” or overfilling, of hopper vessels used to ferry scooped up sand from the deepened channel to Broadkill. The practice allows hauling of more wet sand per trip, but will also increase turbidity in bay waters along the route as loads drain and free sediments escape.

Broadkill Beach, east of Milton, is the state’s largest unincorporated bayside community and among its

wealthiest, with hundreds of homes bracketed by the Delaware Bay on the east and marshland associated with Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge to the west.

Although wide beach stretches remain in parts of the community, storms have chewed other areas dangerously close to homes, with some properties regularly surrounded by water at high tides or during storms. Marshland flooding from areas to the north at times covers or closes the community's only public access road.

State officials have warned that long term climate change, sea-level rise and worsening storms already threaten all communities along the Delaware Bay and Delaware River, including parts of the City of Wilmington.

The original state and Corps plan at Broadkill called for dredge crews to deliver sand from a long stretch of the ongoing Delaware River main channel deepening to the community's bayfront. There it would be spread along a 15,000 foot stretch, creating a 100-foot wide buffer up to 8 feet above the water, topped at its landside edge by an 8-foot-high protective dune.

Workers would have had as little as 120 days to finish the job under the deepening contract that drew no bids, although DNREC agreed to take on some shoreline chores, including installation of sand fencing and beach grass plantings.

Edward Voigt, spokesman for the Corps of Engineers regional office in Philadelphia, said Thursday that federal officials are waiting for DNREC's approval and plan before moving ahead with a new contract solicitation.

Plans currently call for work to start in September or October of 2014, however.

Jim Bailey, president of the Broadkill Beach Preservation Association, said he was unaware of the new terms, but watching closely.

“I knew they were revamping the bid documents, but we haven’t received any real projections,” Bailey said. “We weren’t given any hopes. We were told it wasn’t a matter of if, it was a matter of when.”

Earlier this year, the chief executive officer of the nation’s largest dredging company said that under the original tight, wintertime project deadline, “there was significantly more risk put on the dredger.”

“There is dredging capacity, but I think there will be certain people that will shy away from Northeast work that probably gets a bit late in the fall and has to be done in the winter. It’s rougher out there,” Jon Berger, Great Lakes Dock & Dredge Co. chief executive officer, said in a transcript of a quarterly earnings conference with analysts shortly after the failed bid solicitation.

Bailey said that residents are simply “crossing our fingers and hoping.”

“We’ve only been working on this project for 20 years,” Bailey said. “There’s no sense jumping up and down about it.”

A report issued in 2010 concluded that more than \$16 million would be needed just to maintain the state’s seven

recognized bay beach communities from Dover south for a 10 year period.

Officials later said that price tag significantly underestimates the current cost of sand placement.

Broadkill's project, now estimated to cost \$14.3 million if completed without help from the deepening project, calls for a significantly wider and tougher beach than the state's 10-year proposal.

Completion would provide the community with federal assurance for regular beach maintenance and storm repairs for 50 years, an arrangement matching those issued to Delaware's Atlantic coastal resort beaches.

Corps and DNREC officials developed the plan for "beneficial re-use" of main channel deepening sand at Broadkill at a time when the federal agency was working to shore up public and state support for the deepening, originally authorized by Congress in 1992.

More than half the 103-mile channel deepening between Philadelphia and the Atlantic is complete. The project was developed to lower the channel bottom to 45 feet from its current 40-foot depth.

Voigt said federal officials hope to have the entire deepening complete by 2017.