

# Common sense on common grounds

BY THE SULLIVAN'S ISLANDERS

On August 4, consultants hired by the Sullivan's Island Town Council presented management options for the 90 plus acres of accreted land in the RC-1 Recreation and Conservation Area District. This RC-1 land was placed in trust in 1991 with deed restrictions and Town ordinances indicating that the property should "remain in its natural state". While given latitude to manage the accreted land, Council is also required to determine whether the benefits of any proposed changes "outweigh the damage done to the aesthetic, ecological, scientific, or educational value of the Property in its natural state" and to consider alternative methods "which do not impact adversely on the natural state of the Property". The Town's management plan established in 1995 provided for (1) beach paths for public and emergency access, (2) no cutting or pruning of hardwood trees and (3) limited pruning of Wax myrtles, Popcorn trees and Baccharis to seven feet to achieve an ocean view corridor. In 2003, the minimum pruning height was lowered to five feet for ease of pruning which led to an unintended consequence: unsightly flat-topping of acres of myrtles with corresponding degradation of our natural barrier island habitats. Based on Town Council's RFQ, consultants were charged with developing an improved conservation management plan that is scientifically based, including recommendations concerning the current trimming practices for an "ocean view corridor", and "best protects the accreted land".

Given the deed restrictions and the Town Council's charge to consultants, it was disappointing that so little of the August 4 meeting dealt with crafting a plan that combines conservation of our natural barrier island habitats with lower-impact options for maintaining ocean views. Both goals are achievable and should be the focus of our creative efforts. Instead, discussions have focused on property values - with mosquitoes, rats, snakes, fire and crime introduced - primarily to support a "need" to remove most of the current myrtles and trees and replace them with innocuous grasslands.

## On Property Values:

It is being argued that preserving an expansive ocean view is critical to maintaining property value, both for weekly rental and for resale. It is further suggested that adopting policies to maximize the property values of the 84 front beach properties

bordering the accreted land (Station 16 to Station 28 1/2) is in the best interest of all Sullivan's Island citizens because this will keep our taxes low. We respectfully disagree with this position for the following reasons:

First, it is doubtful that the assessed value of these 84 properties - only 8% of the 1026 or so tax-paying properties on Sullivan's Island - contribute to a disproportionate share of the Town's tax base.

Second, and more to the point, Sullivan's Island residents have always chosen to pursue policies that maximize the quality of life rather than the tax base. Over the years, represented by our Mayor and Town Council, we have rejected the following: hotels, bed and breakfasts, condominiums, docks to every trickle of water in our marsh, subdivision of residential lots, mini-hotels for weekly rental and recently, development of the old dump site, all of which would have increased the tax base. It is equally probable that property values, island-wide, are greater today because we have chosen quality of life over short-term financial gain. Today, many Islanders value the natural beauty afforded by our rich and varied barrier island ecosystems: the marshes, dune grasses, swale ponds, myrtle scrub forest and developing maritime forest.

Third, while we all recognize the concerns of our front beach neighbors, surely they understand that the impact of a maritime forest that may, or may not, develop on the accreted land (depending on the vagaries of nature) is far less than the impact of rows of houses built between their homes and the beach that are prevented by the RC-1 trust. The history of Sullivan's Island is one of growth toward the ocean, with new streets platted and new homes built on accreted land. The Officers Quarters built on the beach are now several streets away. Owners of beach front homes on Ion became second-row home owners when accreted land was sold for today's houses on Atlantic Avenue, and owners of beach front homes on Atlantic Avenue became second-row home owners when houses on Bayonne were built on accreted land. Our current front beach neighbors need to appreciate that it is the protected RC-1 area, placed in trust to prevent development, which has preserved their first-row status. Furthermore, every property owner on Sullivan's Island has sacrificed the increase in the town's tax base - and consequently lower property taxes - that would have resulted from additional houses being built on

this accreted land. All residents of Sullivan's Island have made this sacrifice, and all residents are paying higher taxes, in order to preserve our accreted land as a treasure for all to enjoy in many different ways.

## On Mosquitoes, rats, snakes, fires and crime:

Additional, ancillary issues are raised that supposedly bolster the need for extensive removal of vegetation in the accreted land. All of these ancillary issues have relatively simple and less expensive alternative solutions.

**Mosquitoes and Rats:** The hedging of the myrtles has led to dense growth that can trap moisture, increase mosquitoes, and shield rats from predators. According to the consultants, one solution is to stop hedging the myrtles. However, it is not clear that these pests are any greater problem near the accreted land than elsewhere on the island. All Islanders use the beach paths through the accreted land and few have complained.

**Fires:** Although some have expressed a fear of fire in the myrtles, fires in accreted land have been rare in the past 30 years. Most front-row homes are a considerable distance from RC-1 myrtles, and closer to pines in their own yards than to pines in the protected area. The one recent fire was far from the adjacent home and was quickly extinguished by our fire department. If fire is a problem, we should consider options such as selective thinning or removal of invasive species immediately adjacent to homes.

**Personal safety:** The 2007 attack at Station 16 was despicable, but is this a sufficient reason for dismantling the maritime forest as some have suggested? Thousand upon thousands of visitors have accessed our beach with very few problems. In 30 years we have confirmed only two additional incidents near the beach. One occurred in the dunes, yet the Town did not consider flattening the dunes. The other occurred on a beach path, but the attacker hid behind vegetation on private property and the young lady escaped by running into the myrtles in the accreted land area. The scope of these problems needs to be established to develop appropriate and proportionate solutions. These ancillary issues should not serve as a pretext for wholesale removal of myrtles and trees in the accreted land.

## On The Management Options:

The consultants outlined four land management options and solicited feedback by way

of a rating form. The August 4 presentation skimmed through Option 1: leaving the land largely in a natural state. It pointed out problems with Option 2: continuing present practices. It completely skipped Option 3: expanded vegetation management. The focus of the presentation was almost entirely on Option 4: expanded vegetation management and topographic manipulation. This option requires the construction of a berm (termed a "storm dune") approximately 6 ft high, 75 ft wide at the base and tapering to 25 ft at the top, which would run the length of the accreted land (Station 12 to Station 28 1/2). This berm is to replace the natural storm protection that is provided by the myrtles and trees, which would be largely removed and replaced by grasslands. This option also includes some drainage of wetlands to form duck ponds and footpaths through a reconstructed park-like area. The consultants avoided a question about cost and countered that grants could be sought to fund this option.

We favor a thoughtful combination of options 1, 2 and 3, with a different management strategy for different areas. We are strongly opposed to Option 4. The RC-1 land was placed in trust to preserve in its natural state for the benefit and enjoyment of all the citizens of Sullivan's Island. It is a beautiful and varied habitat, with great ecological and educational value. It makes no sense to essentially reconfigure this natural area into a park, at major expense and considerable ecological damage, when all of the goals can be obtained with far less drastic, and far less expensive, measures. It will be a net loss if we replace our swale ponds with duck ponds. Our natural vegetation - plus the elevation and construction of our homes - provide substantial storm protection. It is neither cost-effective nor ecologically sound to remove considerable amounts of our natural barrier island vegetation - which nature provides for free - and replace it with a costly berm, for a relatively minor net gain in storm protection. And, after the next hurricane, nature will replace the vegetation for free.

We hope everyone will continue to stay informed, and participate, as this important debate continues. Town Council and the Planning Commission will discuss the issues, hold public hearings, and make decisions. Please express your opinions to Town Council and be a part of this process.