

# A Plan for Management of the RC1 Land Trust Area

BY THE SULLIVAN'S ISLANDERS GROUP

"The beach is your first line of defense against a hurricane. The key to this protection is a wide sandy beach and established vegetated dunes that work together to absorb much of the energy of waves." ~Tim Kana, Ph.D., Coastal Science and Engineering. (Clearwater Gazette, June 12, 2009)

The RC-1 land was placed in trust to preserve its natural state, for the benefit and enjoyment of all Sullivan's Island citizens. It is a beautiful and varied barrier island habitat with great aesthetic, ecological, and educational value. The native vegetation and the wildlife that it supports are valued and appreciated by many Sullivan's Island residents as well as many Island visitors. We must recognize that the native vegetation serves essential protective functions: the root systems stabilize the sandy soil and the drought- and salt-resistant native grasses, flowers, shrubs and trees provide an important buffer against the salt spray, waters and winds that come with our tides and storms. Given the vagaries of nature, and the ebb and flow of accretion and erosion, we need to preserve the accreted land as intact as possible, as a buffer against all that nature brings our way. Both the protective function and the great natural beauty of the RC1 area enhance the property values of all Sullivan's Island residents.

We do not believe that first-row homeowners are entitled to an unrestricted, 180-degree ocean view, and no such right should be established. This land belongs to all Island residents. Our preference is that the RC1 area be left untouched to progress naturally, except for beach paths for emergency and public access. However, we understand the need for compromise and favor some accommodation for ocean views for our front-row neighbors, if the views can be provided by judicious, well-

defined and limited vegetation management, following the principles outlined below. Views of the beach can be meaningful and very beautiful while being partial, oblique or shared. Such views of the beach, plus a varied, natural habitat can be provided and maintained with relatively modest management and at relatively modest cost.

**We are in favor of a land management plan for the RC1 area that includes the following:**

1. Retain current regulations (use consultant's Option # 1) the school property (RC1-B) and Fort Moultrie, Station 14 to Station 16 (RC1-D). Cutting and pruning should be prohibited in these areas except for removal of invasive species.
2. For the remaining RC1 areas (A,C & E - use consultant's Options # 2 and # 3):
  - Allow removal of invasive species, such as Chinese Tallow trees, that crowd out other species. A clear distinction should be made between harmful invasives versus species that are simply non-native, such as figs or pecans. Many, if not most, of our island species originated in other areas but nevertheless have been part of the island landscape for many years, are not invasive, and are valuable for birds and wildlife.
  - Allow limited culling of hardwood trees in area where there are multiple small-diameter trees and removal of some will

benefit the others. No tree should be removed that is 4" in diameter or greater. No tree should be removed that is on a critical species



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- list to include: oak, cedar, loblolly pine, palmetto, cypress, and other species identified as valuable for barrier island habitats. A list of critical species should be developed.
- Allow some thinning of myrtles where hedging to 5 feet has led to unnaturally dense thickets. Let the remainder grow in height to shade out thick undergrowth. Variation in habitats would be maintained by periodic and selective pruning of clusters of myrtles, possibly on a rotating basis. Do not allow widespread removal of this valuable dune species by fire, herbicide, or bushhogging, which would cause serious ecological damage and is unnecessary to correct the current problems. Many

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RC1 areas currently have naturally-formed thickets of myrtles, interspersed with areas of grasses and lower bushes, typically on the tops of old dune lines. This pattern could be restored and maintained with relatively modest and inexpensive management practices.

- Allow some thinning of the under-story immediately adjacent to homes (within 50 feet). This could include removal of dead brush and non-critical under-story species which would improve air circulation, contribute to mosquito control, and help expose rodents to control by their natural prey.
- Discontinue the mowing of RC1 land by adjacent property owners as, for example, between Station 23 and 24. Instead, seed these areas with native grasses and flowers and mow on a 3-year cycle to promote natural reseeding.
- Beach paths should provide access for emergency vehicles and beach-goers at specified locations and with well-defined maintenance procedures.

### 3. Develop a clearly defined process for pruning and cutting with the following elements:

- Property owners may request pruning or cutting through an application process.
- A Town-appointed committee would review the request and carry out a site-visit that includes observation of the view from the home. The committee should be advised by an independent professional with experience in barrier island land management, hired part-time by the town, in the same manner that Kent Praise provided expertise to the BZA.

- All pruning and cutting as authorized by the committee should be performed by firms hired and supervised by the above town-hired professional.
- Pruning and cutting costs, as determined by an estimate provided by the person the Town hires to do the work, would be pre-paid by the applicant requesting the trimming.
- 4. **Strong penalties for violations of the regulations are essential for an effective management plan.**
- 5. **With respect to other costs:**
  - The expense of the application and review process would be covered by the application fees, as is now the case for the Design Review Board and the Board of Zoning Appeals.
  - The Town would continue to cover the cost of maintaining and improving public and emergency beach paths as it does now.
  - The Town would cover the cost of removing invasive species. We believe it would be feasible to use volunteers for this effort, with supervision by the town, carried out, gradually, over time.

### We strongly oppose a plan based on the consultant Option # 4 for the following reasons:

- Topographic alterations, whether constructing an artificial storm dune or draining current natural wetlands to form ponds, would require extensive use of heavy mechanized equipment which would severely damage the natural dune and swale topography as well as the root mats that stabilize the sandy soil.
- Extensive removal of current vegetation would disrupt the deep root systems that now stabilize the multiple rows of dunes in the RC1 area.

are critical for recovery of the dunes after storms.

- The National Park Service (Scientific Monographic No. 9) has stopped use of artificially constructed dunes after finding that: artificial dunes, even when planted with vegetation, required expensive repairs after storms and caused scouring and

erosion problems similar to those of hard barriers on beaches.

- natural dunes, even when flattened by storms, recovered well. Their natural vegetation with deep root systems recovered quickly and facilitated rapid sand build-up to re-establish the natural dunes. Over the long term, this protection was superior to and far less expensive than artificial dunes.
- Option 4 would replace the natural protections currently provided by our dunes and vegetation with a very expensive artificial storm dune that, because it is situated far land-ward, would be of value only during the most severe storm.
- Option 4 would provide no protection for RC1 land between the high tide line and the artificial dune. This area would be seriously degraded – and open to erosion – if its soil and root systems are disrupted by extensive removal of vegetation to provide 180-degree ocean views.
- The dollar cost of constructing the proposed storm dune, which would require the equivalent of constructing a roadway, piling it high with sand, and stabilizing it with newly planted vegetation, would be very high. The consultants suggested that this cost could be covered by grants; however, at best, the process of seeking and obtaining grant funding would be arduous and lengthy and would substantially delay implementation of Option 4. At worst, funding agencies may seriously question funding an extensive plan that degrades a natural barrier island Land Trust area to provide and maintain ocean views for relatively few private property owners.
- If higher dunes are desirable, it would be far less expensive, to augment the dunes along the beach by erecting sand fences, as we did after Hurricane Hugo, to trap more of the free sand that the Isle of Palms sends us.

In conclusion, The Sullivan's Islanders Group believes that the Plan outlined above would improve long-term management of the RC1 land in a manner that is both practical and relatively inexpensive to implement. This Plan would preserve the land as intended under the provisions of the Land Trust – as a natural barrier island ecosystem and also as a natural storm buffer. At the same time this plan would serve the needs of Island residents who live adjacent to the RC1 land. We ask that Town Council give this Plan serious consideration.

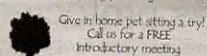
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