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An Open Letter to Palm Beach County: South Palm Beach

Needs to Restore Its Beach for our Mutual Benefit

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Aerial view of South Palm Beach

The beach is the most fundamental facet of Palm Beach county living, particularly those of us who live closer to the coast such as the residents of South Palm Beach; a community that unfortunately might lose this intrinsic part of our way of life. All of us in the Palm Beaches know the joys of going to the beach, be it for a suntan session out in the sun, a stroll down the beach as the sun sets as beautifully as it rises, some tasty picnics with family friends as the waves crash and sand castles are constructed around you, or even just to see it as you drive down A1A. It offers so much enjoyment that it becomes why we continue to live here and why many more continue to flock here for the holidays, reminding us about our struggle with snowbirds. Whether we like it or not though– from

Jupiter to Lake Worth all the way down to Boca Raton—it is the beach that provides an integral source of revenue: tourism. 2022 alone saw a record broken with 9.1 million visitors visiting Palm Beach county and bringing with them 9.7 million in economic impact. In fact, last year saw “a record bed tax collections at a level unprecedented, over 40% above the past peak year, which was 2019” as well as the finding that “the spending by tourists supports up to 70,000 jobs, generating \$242 million in taxes and benefitting



Sea turtles hatching in South Palm Beach

beaches, cultural venues and environmental lands.” (Sczeny, 2023). Furthermore, the beach hosts more than your average tourist, as the beach is where several species of turtle, including some endangered, lay their eggs where they will eventually hatch and then subsequently return to to lay their own eggs later on. The beach is fundamental to us as much as it is the local flora and fauna that call it home, making beach restoration of the utmost importance. It is imperative that all the reaches of the beach, every section of the county’s coastline, and every coastal community be given fair and equitable beach restoration projects. Some parts of the county have succeeded in this regard, however South Palm Beach has not only been left behind in this process but has been forced behind by its neighbors.

While the rest of Palm Beach went through extensive beach restoration back in 2019 and 2020, South Palm Beach merely and only by luck and generosity received the leftovers of said projects. Oddly enough, while neighboring Palm Beach and Manalapan that border South Palm Beach poured millions of dollars into massive renourishment projects for their beaches backed and funded by the county, “Palm Beach County abruptly pulled out of a project to install groins on the South Palm beaches, citing rising costs and objections from communities to the south” (Moffett, 2021). This is in reference to Manalapan and the Eau spa and resort that lies between Manalapan and South Palm both threatening legal action on the small town’s restoration plans claiming that certain beach renourishment plans, specifically the installation of concrete groins on the beach, would “steal sand destined for their beaches” (Moffett, 2021). This was back in 2019, when these plans had taken both South Palm Beach and Palm Beach county officials 13 years and 1.7 million dollars to create a plan with the advice of scientists and engineers and the support of lobbyists, politicians, and eager and apprehensive residents alike. The plan itself



Example of the type of concrete groins that would be constructed

originally took into account how vulnerable South Palm's beach is, proposing not just beach sand and dune renourishment but engineering support structures that help to keep sand stable. The structure proposed was a series of groins made from various rocks and boulders protruding vertically out to the water, however this plan needed to be adjusted to accommodate another facet of South Palm's beach: the rocky hard bottom of the town's shoreline. This unique rock bed, which also prevents a more common solution of offshore dredging of sand, posed potential environmental damage if the groins were to be put in place, thus in addition to the groins there would be an artificial reef constructed roughly 8 acres offshore to accommodate for this potential problem (Moffett, 2019). Unfortunately this also meant that the estimated price of this project had to accommodate these changes as well, causing the price of the project to increase from \$10 million to \$25 million. Additionally, the prior mentioned complaints and threats of Manalapan the Eau caused the state of Florida to request if any beach erosion or damage does occur along Manalapan and by extension the Eau's shoreline, both the county and the town will cover the costs. Even with the original plan seeing the state cover half the costs of the project and the county covering 30% and the town the remaining 20%, officials said the incredible increase in estimated costs as well as "The potential legal liability for South Palm Beach could bankrupt the town" (Moffet, 2019). Upon this realization, the county backed out of the project in 2019 and left South Palm and its beach adrift, without a course of action to prevent further beach erosion.

More recently, the circumstances of South Palm Beach's coastline has ebbed and flowed, and improved and worsened to the point that action still needs to be taken to



Trucks of extra sand sent by Palm Beach to help their neighbor, South Palm Beach, with minor restoration

ensure this town has its beach restored properly and fairly like its county counterparts.

The 2019 plan previously discussed was scrapped and nothing was proposed as a long term solution particularly in the face of South Palm Beach's less supportive neighbors; however, the town's northern neighbor of Palm Beach under former mayor Gail Coniglio's leadership in 2021 provided a helpful hand. Coniglio offered South Palm Beach "as many as 1,000 truckloads of sand that Palm Beach had dredged up as part of the town's (Palm Beach's) extensive beach renourishment project" (Moffet, 2021). It ended up costing South Palm Beach between \$700,000 and \$900,000 in reserves meant for beach restoration and while it did propose a short term solution for the town's shoreline, that's just what it was: a temporary solution. One that both town's recognized as being particularly temporary should a major storm come and "wash away much of the work" (Moffet, 2021) which ended up occurring merely 3 years later with Hurricane Nicole. While Nicole was not a major storm and if anything the winds from the north and the north west of Nicole actually causes less beach erosion than storms with winds coming from other directions, and beaches that had good restoration projects fared well with little sand loss (Phillips, 2022).

South Palm Beach was not one of those beaches, and as a result it left South Palm practically back to where it was before Palm Beach's generous donation. The most recent plan for restoration came with collaboration with the town of Lantana which has its own small public beach nestled in between South Palm and the fickle Eau Resort and Spa, which while primarily benefiting Lantana's small beach via sand, the plan would have also assisted South Palm. Sadly, hurricane Nicole thwarted even this plan as the project was originally planned to commence later this month on February 28, 2023; however, according to the town of Lantana, "the Dune Restoration Project will most likely be delayed until late next year (2023) or early 2024 due to the fact that the sand stockpile that was reserved for this project at Phipps Ocean Park was unfortunately washed away during Hurricane Nicole" (Lantana). For all of its efforts and all of its need, South Palm Beach continues to be left grievously unattended to and with little time left to continue being wasted.

Action needs to be taken immediately on the part of the county to make amends for further inaction on beach restoration for the town of South Palm Beach, and while this cause is for the beach of South Palm it is a struggle all residents need to get behind for our mutual benefit. While South Palm Beach is a mere 5/8ths of a mile long strip along a larger barrier island and under 1,500 residents, it should not be overlooked as its greatest asset, its beach, is one that is not only shared by other residents but one that affects its neighbors' beaches. It is not just about the town of South Palm Beach, it is about this county as a community coming together to help protect and renourish the beach in a way that benefits us all, as saving South Palm's small beach makes a huge impact. If no effort is made on the part of the county to negotiate with former disgruntled parties at proper and

effective methods of restoring South Palm's beach, to consult scientists and engineers in that process alone, and to understand the importance of taking care of this beach to the residents of Palm Beach county as a whole, than the county as a whole will suffer.

Economically, the beach is what continues to pull visitors and new residents to Palm Beach and provide us with the great economic gains that reach into the billions and support our local community. One such community that offers an ideal location for potential residents willing to contribute to those millions and billions is South Palm Beach. If the beach continues to erode, the value of the condos in the town—which recently has continued to rise on average close to \$1 million—will greatly decrease. Thus the value of the homes in South Palm will greatly decline and the county's revenue will decline to an extent. However, the value of the surrounding communities is likely to also decrease as a result and have even greater economic impact, as again, the beach is one great entity and one section of it affects the next. If South Palm's section of beach erodes, it puts the other sections of beach at risk as well, as the natural flow of sand will be disrupted if one section of beach sand disappears under the waves due to neglect from the county. It will mean other coastal towns, be they Manalapan or Palm Beach, will suffer irregularities in the



Turtle eggs exposed to the elements and to predators due to the effects of beach erosion eroding the sand they were laid in

distribution of their sand and could jeopardize the progress they made and the money spent on their beach restoration projects and not South Palm's. This puts their tourism and real estate economics at risk for depreciation, just as it puts the county at environmental risk for the lack of beach and therefore lack of location for endangered sea turtle species, such as the leather back, to lay their eggs. Turtles will return to the same beach they were hatched at to lay their own eggs and their offspring will continue this biological wonder; that is, they will continue it so long as there is still a beach to return to. Carelessly not addressing South Palm's beach restoration would be an environmental disaster generally speaking, but this kind of neglect affecting turtles already endangered would be catastrophic for them and their population numbers as well as catastrophic for Palm Beach county. One can only imagine the retaliation Palm Beach county as a whole would face from the state and various environmental groups if this is to take place.

That is the key here, as beyond the devastation this would bring South Palm Beach, South Palm Beach is greatly integrated into the rest of the county and therefore anything that happens to it with its beach affects the rest of Palm Beach's citizens. All residents of the various communities here need to recognize the greater effect this has on this country's quality of life and prosperity. This is an issue that reaches us all and we must act as a community to make the county take action; they need to understand the gravity of the situation, the essence of time and how it is dwindling, and especially how much it means to us to protect our home. County officials need to be lobbied, local officials who understand the importance of seeing the entire beach as a unit to be taken care of equally need to be voted in, be they the mayor of South Palm Beach or a local commissioner in a

distant town. News outlets need to put a spotlight on activists and environmentalists who recognize the threat of beach erosion in Palm Beach county particularly in neglected,



Aerial view of South Palm Beach, a community as important as all the others in our county

small, and vulnerable areas like South Palm Beach where the greatest threats are posed.

The community needs to take action and the action the county ends up taking as a result of this outcry is equally important. Residents should be advocating for a long term solution to prevent further erosion of South Palm's beach once and for all. Perhaps it is a revitalization of the original 2019 plan, perhaps it is an extraordinary dune restoration program with tens of thousands of trucks of sand dumping new sand onto the beaches, perhaps it is a completely new plan, or perhaps it is a revised version of the 2019 plan with some new components, either way, the county has to keep the county as a whole in mind. One of the reasons why the 2019 plan failed to come to fruition was a lack of cooperation from other county communities, thus it is critical that the county be in talks with the surrounding communities and emphasize the need for a practical and effective solution while being equally considerate of neighboring communities like Manalapan. As

mentioned earlier, this is an issue that affects us all and we must all act together to save this extraordinary part of this beautiful county we call home.

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