

BELLEAIR SHORE PETITION SEEKS TO ERASE KEY COASTAL BOUNDARY

BELLEAIR BEACH WARNS NEIGHBOR'S MOVE COULD RESTRICT PUBLIC USE

BY: Carlos Moncada

BELLEAIR SHORE—A petition drive to do away with a key coastal boundary could alter where the public can walk along the mile-long stretch of shoreline here, prompting concerns from neighboring Belleair Beach.

The issue arose during a recent Belleair Beach City Council meeting, during which council members said their counterparts in Belleair Shore are circulating a petition aimed at removing what's known as the erosion control line.

to the water. We won't be able to keep people from traversing as long as they stay in the water, but we will be able to keep them off the beach.' ”

City leaders said they have not seen the petition but encouraged residents to request a copy and review it closely.

“Take a look at what they're proposing and talk to the state about it,” council member Jody Shirley told the crowd. “Because that's going to cause more damage to our beach access than anything else.”

The Belleair Shore Town Commission

front homes, has long drawn attention for its restrictive beach rules. The upscale town does not provide public beach access and, as a result, does not participate in federally funded beach renourishment projects.

Neither the town's mayor, Steve Blume, nor any of the four commissioners could be reached for comment about the petition drive.

A spokesperson for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) in Tallahassee said at press time that the agency had received no petition from Belleair Shore.

Under state law, any such request would be made to the DEP and would be reviewed “to determine whether there is a sufficient basis for a change,” said Alexandra Kuchta, the agency's communications director.

“The ECL along Sand Key, including within the Town of Belleair Shore, remains in place as the current recorded boundary,” she said.

Pinellas County coastal managers said they would oppose removal of the erosion control line in Belleair Shore.

“The erosion control line is the official boundary between [public] lands and private ownership,” said John Bishop, Pinellas coastal management coordinator. “If the line were eliminated, it would remove public access and use of the beach where it has existed since 1997.”

Belleair Beach officials said they are prepared to respond if necessary, including potentially organizing their own counter-petition or formally opposing any changes.

“If it does come to a point where the state of Florida is actively reviewing the ECL and possibly eliminating it, the city of Belleair Beach has every right to do the same type of petition,” Mayor Dave Gattis said.

Gattis went further, suggesting the effort could exacerbate long-running conflicts between the communities.

“I believe they're strategically trying to create more conflict and make it harder for us to enjoy the beaches,” he said. “I don't think they're anyone's beaches but God's beaches.”

The dispute comes as Belleair Beach and Belleair Shore continue negotiating a revised interlocal agreement governing three beach access lots — an issue that has generated years of friction between them.

While the agreement focuses on shared use and maintenance of specific parcels, council members said the erosion control line's removal could have far wider implications for beach access.

“That would more restrict your beach use more than what we're working on with the accesses,” Shirley told the audience.



Belleair Shore wants to eliminate the state-established erosion control line through the town, prompting concerns from neighboring Belleair Beach and Pinellas County. Aerial from the Pinellas County Property Appraiser's Office.

The state-recognized boundary separates public beach areas from upland private property. It is typically established as part of beach renourishment projects, serving as a legal demarcation that can determine where the public has the right to walk and where private ownership begins.

Eliminating the erosion control line could complicate or potentially limit public beach access, Belleair Beach officials said, depending on how property rights are enforced afterward.

“They're trying to remove your ECL line,” council member Frank Bankard said at an April 27 work session. “They've said, ‘If we get the ECL line removed, we will own

approved the petition's wording and a related fee of \$150 at a meeting Jan. 20, a review of the minutes shows. The petition would require signatures from at least 51 percent of the town's homeowners to move forward, according to the minutes.

During the Feb. 17 commission meeting, Town Attorney Daniel Lewis said he had 17 signed petitions and that Commissioner Rob-in Lally was going door-to-door gathering signatures, the minutes show.

The town is also collecting signatures electronically, the minutes state, although there is no mention of the petition on the town's website even though commissioners discussed placing a form online for residents to sign.

Belleair Shore, which consists of 57 Gulf-

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