

BEACH SCENE

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BEACH RENOURISHMENT PLAN GETS PUBLIC AIRING SOME OPPOSE SAND DUNES NEAR THEIR HOMES

/BY: **Carlos Moncada**

TREASURE ISLAND—A mostly supportive crowd of about 50 people turned out July 9 to hear details of Pinellas County's massive project to rebuild severely eroded beaches along most of its coastline.

But some in the audience at Treasure Island City Hall voiced concerns about plans to rebuild sand dunes along with widening and elevating the beaches.

They said the county's last dune project in 2023 offered little, if any, storm protection. In some areas, the 10-foot-high dunes were nearly completely washed away after a freak winter storm in December of that year. Hurricane Helene further pummeled them in 2024.

"We didn't get the sand dunes, thank God," Mike Pelton, a beach native from Indian Shores, told a panel of county officials. "Because all it did was blow in the road and



More than 50 people turned out to hear about Pinellas County's beach renourishment plans on July 9.

Photo Courtesy Carlos Moncada

cover everybody.

Pelton said that while he supports widening the beaches, "This new sand dune stuff just creates a lot of different issues.

"Putting all those plants all along our beach; we have a beautiful beach, powdered sand. It's beautiful. We love it," he said. "We don't want it ruined with a bunch of plants and a sand dune. It's just the truth, and that's what happened before. It just blew everything in on us. And it was bad. It was a bad design."

Pelton and others also said the dunes, which officials said act as a last line of defense against storm waves, also can make it harder for elderly and disabled people to access the beach. Moreover, they said, some dunes can develop scarping, or steep drop-offs, that can pose a safety risk, especially for youngsters.

But county leaders emphasized that no one has to have a dune if they don't want one. They said that the ill-fated emergency dune project was intended as an interim fix until a more extensive beach renourishment could get underway.



New sand dunes were constructed following Hurricane Idalia in 2023. Some residents have questioned their effectiveness. Photo Courtesy Pinellas County

"We had nothing in front of the dunes to break up those waves," said Kelli Hammer Levy, the county's public works director. "This time you're going to have a fully constructed beach with a dune, like we had in the past."

The meeting was the first of three public informational gatherings the

county has scheduled between now and when the \$125.7 million project begins in September. That's usually the most active month of the Atlantic hurricane season that runs from June through November.

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The project would add 2.5 million cubic yards of sand on the island of Sand Key (Clearwater Beach to Belleair Beach and Indian Rocks Beach to North Redington Beach), Treasure Island and Upham Beach.

Those beaches would be widened as much as 270 feet, extended out into the Gulf, and elevated up to five feet, with the dunes adding another 3 feet in height. Sand will be dredged from offshore and then pumped to the beaches and moved to various locations with heavy machinery.

Absent funding from the federal government, the county is proceeding

some who have refused to sign regard it as an infringement on their property rights.

"Unsurprisingly, there were a lot of homeowners that were uncomfortable with agreeing to that language," County Commission Chairman Brian Scott said.

Scott and colleague Kathleen Peters stressed the need to get full participation from all affected property owners so that the project will not contain gaps, which would provide less storm protection.

The county has fashioned a less restrictive temporary construction easement agreement with the aim of

Tentative Scheduled Start Dates

Pinellas County

24-7 Construction Operations

North Indian Rocks Beach
• September 2025

Belleair Beach and Clearwater
• October 2025

South Indian Rocks Beach
• November 2025

Indian Shores
• December 2025

Redington's
• December 2025

Upham and South Sunset
• September 2025

Sunshine and North Sunset
• October 2025

Middle Sunset Beach
• January 2026



Note: The schedule is subject to change and is for informational purposes only. Maintenance construction activities will be ongoing beyond these timeframes.

A breakdown of when the beach renourishment project will begin by community.

Photo Courtesy of Pinellas County

with the project on its own as a one-time emergency, paying for it with tourist tax dollars and, to a lesser extent, state grants.

On previous renourishment projects, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers pro-

making it more palatable to holdouts.

However, nearly 140 easements are still needed, mostly from Indian Rocks Beach, Indian Shores and Redington Beach, officials said.

And like sands through an hourglass, time is running out.

Public Meeting Schedule

Pinellas County

- **July 9, 6-8 p.m., Treasure Island City Hall**
- **July 16, 6-8 p.m., Virtual**
Register at pinellas.gov/signforsand
- **Aug. 6, 6-8 p.m., Belleair Beach, 444 Causeway Blvd**

More details on the breakdown of when the beach renourishment project will begin by community.

Photo Courtesy of Pinellas County

vided up to 65 percent of the funding, with the county and state evenly splitting the balance. But in recent years, officials said, the Army Corps began requiring property owners to sign a perpetual public access easement in order for Pinellas to get federal funds.

The easements are intended to allow legal access to traverse and place sand on portions of private property, although

"We need everyone to sign those construction easements so that we can put sand back in place and have protection for this storm season that's come upon us very quickly," Peters implored the crowd. "And the sooner we can move and the more comprehensive we can make it, the safer it will be."