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BEACH MAYORS ASK PRESIDENT FOR HELP WITH STORM RECOVERY & BEACH RENOURISHMENT

/BY: **Carlos Moncada**

BELLEAIR BEACH — Pinellas County beach mayors are asking President Donald Trump to change a federal disaster rule that is forcing hurricane victims with substantial flood damage to either build up their homes or demolish them.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency’s notorious “50% rule” states that if a home sustains damage to at least half its market value, it is considered “substantially damaged” and thus must be elevated or torn down.

The costly rule has posed an emotional dilemma for many coastal homeowners flooded by last year’s hurricanes — primarily Helene — who must decide whether to move up or out.

In recent letters to the president, 11 beach mayors who comprise the Barrier Islands Governmental Council, or “BIG-C,” request updating the 50% rule to 75% to reflect today’s costs.

“The outdated 50% rule forces unnecessary demolitions due to rising construction costs,” the mayors wrote. “We propose increasing the threshold to 75 percent to allow more homeowners to repair rather than demolish.”

At a March 3 Belleair Beach City Council meeting, Mayor Dave Gattis provided some more insight. He pointed out that while homes depreciate in value over time if not renovated or otherwise improved, the cost of repairs continues to climb.

“I’m assuming that whenever the 50% rule was created, there was probably a little gap between depreciation and inflation,” said Gattis, the Big-C’s vice president. “But over time, that gap gets wider and wider and sucks more and more residents whenever we have an event like [Helene].”

Gattis called the proposed 50% rule change a “super big ask,” along with several other requests the mayors made in the pair of Feb. 12



Belleair Beach Mayor Dave Gattis. Photo: City of Belleair Beach



Pinellas Cty. Comm’r Kathleen Peters. Photo: Pinellas County

restoration in 2018. So the mayors are asking Trump to eliminate the requirements for perpetual and public access easements that they said are overly burdensome for at-risk homeowners not only in Pinellas but across the country.

“If you go down to Indian Shores, Indian Rocks Beach, there’s many, many homes where that easement literally comes right up to their back door,” Gattis said. “And the federal government says for you to receive that sand, you have to allow strangers to walk into your backyard. And you can’t do anything about it. So this is the reason they’re not willing to sign.”

Faced with possibly receiving no federal dollars, Pinellas plans to use tourist tax money for a county-led effort to restore beaches that help draw millions of visitors annually. But only about two-thirds of affected property owners have granted the required construction easements, despite the county removing references to public access to entice more people to sign. That

means some communities likely will have gaps, thereby providing less storm protection.

As of this week, Pinellas still needed a total of 70 construction easements, mostly from Indian Rocks Beach, Indian Shores and Redington Shores, said Tony Fabrizio, a county spokesperson.

Gattis said the county has it “half right” and “half wrong” on the easements.

“They’re not requiring the public access piece of it,” he said. “You think that would make a nice carrot to make people want to sign. But unfortunately, they’re also asking for perpetual easements. And that right there is a deal breaker for many, many people.”

Last week, a contingent of Pinellas officials traveled to Washington, D.C. to urgently push for federally funded beach renourishment. The county still hopes to begin laying sand before the 2025 hurricane season starts June 1.

“Our meetings at the White House, Capitol Hill and the Pentagon were incredibly productive,” County Commissioner Kathleen Peters stated. “The necessity of beach nourishment for Pinellas is clear to all — we need sand back on our beaches to protect our infrastructure and economy, and to preserve our way of life.”

letters to Trump, who has called FEMA a “disaster” and intends to reshape or abolish the agency.

The mayors also are calling for reforms to policies of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which is authorized to carry out beach rebuilding projects for shoreline protection. Among the policies targeted is one that requires property owners to grant public access in order for beach communities to receive sand at taxpayer expense.

The Army Corps has told Pinellas officials to obtain perpetual public access easements

from all property owners along the entire length of the stalled Sand Key Beach Renourishment project, which would add sand from Clearwater south to Redington Beach, excluding Belleair Shore. That and two smaller projects, on Treasure Island and Long Key, would cover the coastline from Clearwater to St. Pete Beach and cost more than \$100 million, of which the Army Corps would pay about 65 percent.

But the lack of required easements has delayed efforts to rebuild shorelines eroded since the last



Hurricane Damage On Treasure Island: Photo Courtesy of The City Of Treasure Island