Beaufort remains concerned about erosion

Shifting Sands - Laura Bischoff

Bird Shoal
This is a current map of the Rachel Carson Natural Estuarine Reserve, with an overlay of the coastline at Bird Shoal in 1993 in red. Beaufort and area officials are concerned that erosion at Bird Shoal will diminish the protection the barrier provides the town waterfront. (Contributed graphic)

JACKIE STARKEY | Posted: Saturday, June 18, 2016 11:55 pm - Carteret County NEWS-TIMES

BEAUFORT — Town officials remain concerned about erosion at the Rachel Carson Reserve and preserving the shelter the barrier islands adjacent to Beaufort Inlet supply to the town’s historic waterfront.

Reported overwash at Bird Shoal, the ocean-facing western end of the reserve, in early May bred worry the barriers are disintegrating, potentially exposing downtown not to the calm waters of Taylor’s Creek, but the ocean.

But a state official with the N.C. Division of Coastal Management, however, told the board last week the island is migrating naturally and maintaining its width at Bird Shoal.

“Natural processes are influencing our barrier islands on a day-to-day basis. They are anticipated and they’re expected,” shoreline management specialist Ken Richardson informed commissioners at their Monday meeting in the train depot.

According to state data, erosion on the oceanside of Bird Shoal is complimented by accumulation along the town side, moving the barrier island physically toward Beaufort.

On the Taylor’s Creek side of the eastern end of the reserve at large, the shoreline is eroding by an average of a foot per year, according to data collected from 1993 to 2014.

“I would probably put that 1 foot in the area of potential error in the mapping,” Mr. Richardson said. “For the most part, that Taylor’s Creek side of the reserve is fairly stable, not a whole lot of change.”

Over on the oceanward edge of Bird Shoal, where the overwash occurred, erosion averages almost 12 feet per year, according to Mr. Richardson, while on the landward side, Bird Shoal gains an average of 13.5 feet.

“Which tells me that Bird Shoal itself is migrating, but maintaining its general width,” he concluded.

A number of natural and manmade factors could push the oceanward shoreline’s erosion he said, including the width of the Beaufort Inlet access, storms and hurricanes that shift sediment rapidly, dredging in the inlet and possibly any hardened structures erected to prevent erosion.
“The area around Beaufort Inlet is not natural. It’s dredged constantly … things have not always looked the way it looks,” he said.

While the board touched on the impact inlet dredging could have on the shoreline, Mr. Richardson noted there was no “100 percent” consensus the dredging was the main problem.

Officials from a number of agencies are monitoring, mapping, gathering elevation and other data, and working to determine the best course of action – potentially a long-term monitoring plan for the shoreline using unmanned aircraft, Paula Gillikin, central sites manager for the N.C. Coastal Reserve and National Estuarine Research Reserve, informed commissioners.

The town’s concern with overwash at Bird Shoal lies in the storm protection the reserve offers as a buffer for flooding and other adverse conditions. Board members noted Monday they noticed changes along the waterfront, possibly credited to erosion at Rachel Carson.

“I could remember five, 10 years ago you could sit on the Beaufort waterfront and you couldn’t see the inlet, and it’s readily seen now,” Mayor Richard Stanley observed.

When questioned, Mr. Richardson wouldn’t commit to sea level rise as a cause, “call it what you want,” he noted, but changes are being observed at shorelines and barriers all along the coast.

No solutions were suggested to or by the town, who were set to also consider establishing a Channel and Shoreline Protection Commission Monday.

Assembling that group was pulled from the agenda for further discussion about the commission’s mission and timeframe, according to town manager Charles Burgess.

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