

# CURRITUCK COUNTY news

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## County looks at flooding in Ocean Sands

By LINDA CAIN

The scenario was familiar, but the location was different this time.

Heavy rains, nowhere to drain, flooded streets and houses. It's happened in places throughout the county — at various spots in Moyock, the northern beaches, and up until recently (and \$8 million later) at Whalehead. But, the latest neighborhood looking for relief is Ocean Sands.

The system that preceded Hurricane Joaquin left 16 inches of water standing on some streets in Ocean Sands, high enough to enter some ground level homes, structures that by today's standards would have been elevated one foot above base flood elevation.

Flooded streets, yards and homes had been a problem for years in the Whalehead community which sits on the Outer Banks north of Ocean Sands. And during a work session held prior to the board of commissioners final October meeting, board chairman Paul O'Neal suggested that had the stormwater drainage system not been put in place in Whalehead, they would still be pumping water out of that community.

The rain came down off for more than a week, including about six inches over one weekend, piling up a foot or more of water in Ocean Sands, a beach front community that is about three miles long and takes in 600 acres south of Corolla.

County engineer Eric Weatherly explained during the work session that the state was contacted on October 5 for permission to start pumping, which was denied at first, then the okay given on the 10th and pumping continued until the 14th,

pumping water at a rate of 1,000 gallons/minute from sections of the community into the ocean.

"Political influences on state agencies," was how county manager Dan Scanlon explained the state's change of mind about the pumping.

Scanlon also commended the staff at the Southern Outer Banks Water plant that manned those pumps when the equipment provider couldn't get a crew on such short notice on a Saturday morning.

Right now the only drainage feature the community has is a lake and a ditch, Weatherly pointed out. At one point in the 1980's, Scanlon recalled, there was a pump at the lake to move water to the ocean, but the state was not keen on that so the pump had to go and the ditch was put in.

Weatherly noted that back in 2008 some Ocean Sands property owners recognized the need to do something long term and began researching solutions. That led to a \$20,000 engineering study completed in June by the same group that designed the system for Whalehead, Moffatt and Nichol, that recommended a system for Ocean Sands that is similar to Whalehead's.

The estimated price tag, \$10-\$11.6 million.

To pay for it, one way is to create a service district where a tax would be assessed property owners in that district.

In the Whalehead Service District, taxes are 15.5-cents/per \$100 valuation, but Scanlon said that a tax based on valuation is only one way a service district can raise money. That's up to the property owners to decide.

As part of the process, along with public hearings,

the property owners request the county to create the service district, with specified boundaries and inclusions and purpose, and to set the tax rate sufficient to pay off the project's debt. Once the debt is paid off (for Whalehead, that will be 15 years), the rate would drop substantially, but Scanlon explained the rate will never be zero because some amount will be needed for the district to operate and maintain the system.

In addition to Whalehead, the county has created four other stormwater districts over the years, mostly in Moyock.

In Whalehead, ground water is continuously pumped out at a low rate to provide storage for storm water that is collected in subsurface drains and pumped away. During an event, pumping the groundwater can be stepped up. In this last rain event, the system proved it works as the water was gone by the next morning, Weatherly reported.

Whalehead also added its own 1.5-cent tax for extra roll back trash service.

"If you ask the folks at Whalehead, they're happy," commented Scanlon, who said those property owners believe the system was a worthwhile investment as it helped protect not only property and values, but seasonal rentals as well. When visitors hear about flooding in a community where they plan to vacation, it doesn't matter that many rentals may be high and dry, there are other options elsewhere.

Having Whalehead's success as a model for Ocean Sands to follow, should help that community support such a project, Scanlon suggested.

Commissioner David  
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Griggs added that there has been discussion about not accepting flood insurance claims from areas with reoccurring damages, which would be incentive to have a drainage system in Ocean Sands.

In addition, claims can be rejected if the area is not a permitted space, such as some of those areas under a house that were closed in, Scanlon added.

Chairman O'Neal said that state agencies are reluctant to allow pumping flood waters because that is not considered a stormwater management plan and provides a temporary fix and no incentive to implement a permanent plan and system.

Ocean Sands resident Barbara Marzetti, who also attended the work session, explained that the property owners' committee has started an education campaign to property owners about how the project could protect property values and rentals, as well as the health and safety of the community, and how a service district would work.

Marzetti also noted that the developer, Coastland Corporation, still controls the open space that would be necessary for the drainage system planned. But since the developer has lots for sale where some of the flooding occurs, a drainage system may well be to his advantage, noted commissioner Vance Aydlett.

A tentative timeline could put a request for the commissioners to create the district and set the tax rate by early summer.