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Task force to answer SOS

Wednesday, November 27, 2002

By Amy Jo Johnson
TIMES WRITER

Federal officials are pledging to form a task force to solve the sticky problems of beach weeds, both environmental and political. That was the main news out of a packed meeting Tuesday involving state and federal officials, environmentalists and people lobbying for the right to maintain property along the Saginaw Bay shoreline.

More than 150 people attended the meeting, hosted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and state Rep. Joseph L. Rivet, D-97th District, and held at a fire hall in Bangor Township.

The idea was to find some solution that would satisfy both landowners who want to groom beaches and government agencies that regard beachfront exposed by lower water levels as emerging wetlands.

Lt. Col. Thomas Magness, Detroit District commander of the Corps of Engineers, told the public there are plans to create a balanced task force to streamline the government's permit process for maintaining beaches, and to find a compromise that will work for the public good.

Magness made it clear that the Corps has jurisdiction over land that is below the ordinary high water mark and over

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emergent wetlands next to navigable waterways. However, he said, the goal is to maintain a balance between economic and environmental concerns regarding that land.

"I think that's the only way to find solutions," he said.

Magness said he's also learned through talking with area folks that the Corps of Engineers needs to do a better job of communicating with and educating the public. That will improve, he said.

"If I need to bring my whole district up here, I will," he said. "As a group, we can meet the mark."

But after he listened to an hour and a half of public comment, Magness admitted there's a long road ahead.

"This was talk and talk is cheap. We're committed to action," he said after the meeting.

Magness said he and his staff members will set to work on a possible membership list for a task force, a charter for the group and a sketch for the road ahead. He said he foresees holding an organizing meeting in January.

Interests represented at Tuesday's meeting included Save Our Shoreline, a group pushing for property owner's rights; local environmentalists; the state Department of Environmental Quality; Michigan Sea Grant representatives; Bangor Township government leaders; the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and representatives for a number of elected state and federal officials.

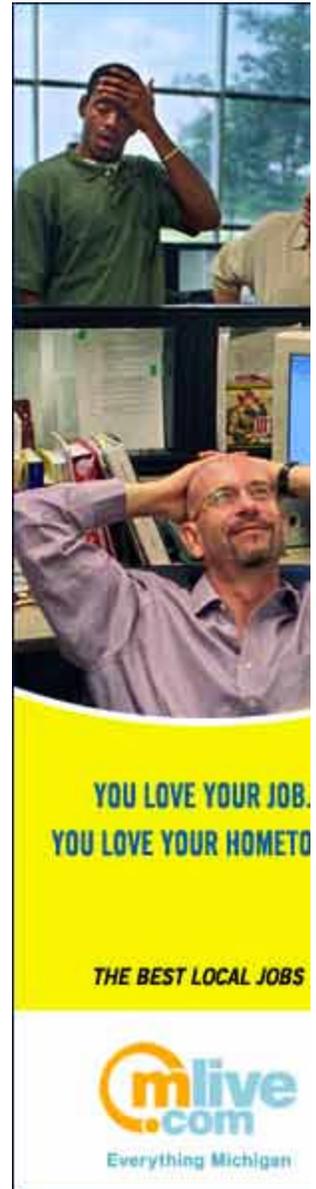
About 15 people spoke at the meeting, including shoreline property owners from as far away as Caseville and Traverse City.

They highlighted a number of waterfront issues from sewage spills to zebra mussels, from trash to mosquitoes, from weeds to muskrats.

Caseville resident Herbert Kincaid said he thinks that the government is trying to create wetlands where they didn't exist before, and at the expense of property owners.

"I really believe it's wrong and unfair," he said.

Mary Beth Koch, a Bangor Township resident and Killarney Beach property owner, said she wants the task force to make it so her 11-year-old daughter doesn't have to be afraid to go outside.



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Koch said her daughter was bitten last year by a muskrat, which the 10-year-old had run after to save from dogs that were chasing it.

Some members of the Save Our Shoreline group were upset that their leader, Ernie Krygier, was left off the guest list of invitees for the meeting.

"I'll take full responsibility for that decision," said Rivet said, noting that he invited other SOS board members because Krygier and SOS Vice President Dave Powers, a Bay City attorney, are involved in litigation on behalf of SOS.

Krygier and Powers showed up anyway, however, and at one point, audience members took to chanting, "Ernie, Ernie, Ernie," before quieting down.

Krygier said he has no doubt that he was black-listed from Tuesday's meetings.

"It was a poor decision on Joe Rivet's part not to include me, as well as Dave Powers," he said.

Krygier said SOS will continue to pursue any avenue to secure people's property rights, whether that be by working with regulatory agencies or using the judicial system.

"Today's meeting, I'm sure, will help the membership," Krygier said. "Anytime you can discuss the issues is a plus."

Rivet said progress was made Tuesday and he expects a solution will be found that is acceptable to most people.

"I would fully hope some solution will be presented by the spring of this year," he said.

- Amy Jo Johnson covers Bay County townships and cities for The Times. She can be reached at 894-9637.

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