

HISTORY OF CONNOR CREEK EROSION - Summarized by Helen Nelson and Janette Hursch, FCZD Advisory Committee members

Connor Creek has a history of migrating north and south along the ocean beach at Copalis Beach. Using various means, local residents have kept the creek meandering between what is now Surfcrest Condominiums and Seaview Estates since the 1940s. In the late 1980s, Connor Creek turned south and threatened one of the Surfcrest buildings. Grays Harbor County and the Army Corps of Engineers granted permits to Surfcrest in 1988 to build a rock revetment and rechannel the creek. The permit included provisions for maintenance.

Then in 1990 Connor Creek began its northerly migration. It has now moved to the north taking out both Heath and Benner Roads and threatening the Griffiths-Priddy State Park at Copalis Beach. During this time the community made many efforts to try to stop the creek's northward movement.

In the spring of 1996 a group of concerned citizens formed the North Beach Coalition primarily to address Connor Creek erosion by moving it back to its historic location between Surfcrest and Seaview Estates. By this time acres of ocean front land and ocean access had been lost by four large year-round resorts and many private landowners. Homes were being threatened as well.

Kevin Varness of Grays Harbor County Public Services provided information on the formation of a Flood Control Zone District (FCZD) and this was duly pursued. The residents and landowners almost unanimously agreed to form this "quasi-municipal" entity both as a taxing base and as a vehicle to solicit help from Grays Harbor County and to be able to apply for grants and loans. The FCZD includes all properties north of Surfcrest, south of and including the Griffiths-Priddy State Park, and west of State Route 109. In July of 1996, the North Beach Coalition and Kevin Varness began meeting with Harry Hosey and Vladimir Shepsis of Pacific International Engineering (PIE) and Judith Schulman of Pharos Corporation. PIE engineers designed a relocation and containment plan.

After many months of meetings, the State Department of Fish and Wildlife returned the permit application for the project based on insufficient information regarding the natural resources in the immediate vicinity. The FCZD argued that the value of the creek as a fish spawning area would not be lost by moving the creek back to its historic location. The fish will find their way to the ocean.

There were meetings, letter writing campaigns to public officials and extensive media coverage. None of this was successful. The Department of Fish and Wildlife and Department of Ecology required additional plans be drawn. In August of 1997 PIE complied and presented four alternative plans with detailed graphs and financial estimates to the assembled permitting agencies, county and FCZD representatives. All of the plans were rejected. The representatives of the permitting agencies did not make a good faith effort to work with the FCZD but instead stonewalled. The FCZD believe their goal was to stall us until the funds dried up and/or we gave up.

From October 1997 until September 2000, efforts to move the creek were put on hold, while the creek continued to migrate north leaving behind severe detrimental impacts to the community. Private property was lost due to erosion by the creek, high water levels in the creek created new flooding on private properties, and in 1999 the county closed two public roads, which the Ocean City beach approach as the only public access to the beach for miles in both directions. County officials succeeded in getting Connor Creek included in the Southwest Washington Coastal Erosion Study. In September 2000 County Commissioner Dan Wood began examining the creek's continued northward erosion and the lack of ocean access for Copalis Beach residents. Meetings have been held to address the issues of Connor Creek meeting the Copalis River, local access to the beach, and relocating the creek. All of these efforts resulted in the development of the May 2001 Connor Creek Erosion Control Project report prepared by PIE. This report contains: a Preliminary Engineering Report which includes hydraulic modeling, an analysis of four engineering approaches to control erosion damage, and nine conceptual structural alternatives, a Natural Resources Assessment that delineates the wetland areas and assesses the value of the associated habitats, and a Regulatory and Permitting Considerations section.

Grays Harbor County organized a community meeting on September 26, 2001. The highly publicized meeting resulted in a record number turnout of over 100 stakeholders. A considerable number of attendees own property and live south in Ocean City, which is outside of the FCZD. This group of stakeholders testified that over the course of the last four years they experienced flood related impacts from Connor Creek, which they attributed to the migration of the mouth, the overgrown vegetation along the creek bed, and an increased number of beaver dams. During the meeting, the community heard a presentation regarding the findings contained in the Connor Creek Erosion Control Project report. After some discussion, the group reviewed short-term and long-term community solutions/goals. A short-term solution included bridges, but did not include locations. The group agreed that this was still a viable short-term goal to return access to the beach, but it was not the long-term solution. The long-term solutions included: no action, fix it where it currently resides, or relocate it in the 1987 vicinity. The majority of the group agreed to pursue the 1987 location with a few members supporting the other alternatives. The outcomes of this meeting included direction to the county to pursue a long-term solution and a pledge from the state agency representatives present to work with the community and the county to develop a viable long-term solution.