

Florida county courts new ally in beach erosion battle: The White House

March 20 2023, by Jack Evans

Cookie Kennedy was out for a walk with a friend one day this winter when she felt a familiar dread creep up on her. As the pair strolled the north shore of Indian Rocks Beach, the small Pinellas County city where Kennedy is mayor, they were forced to weave their way through a thickening crowd of beachgoers. The land where they stood had shrunk.

Pinellas County's beaches are washing away. For decades, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers replenished them, pumping tons of sand every few years onto an 8½-mile stretch of Sand Key, the barrier island home to the county's [beach](#) communities.

Then a new Corps policy created a standoff with the county. A renourishment originally scheduled for 2024 won't happen—not next year, anyway.

Kennedy knew all this, but standing on the beach, she was so disturbed she felt local leaders had to try something new. Months later, they're on a path that may bring them the closest they've gotten yet to resolving the impasse. It goes through a building a Pinellas contingent visited earlier this month: the White House.

"I think we were at a standstill for quite a while now and had lost hope," Kennedy said in an interview. "I just remember, once I saw the beach, I knew who to call."

That was Pinellas County Commission Chairperson Janet Long. Long,

too, has been stymied by what she and other officials characterized as a lack of communication with and accountability for the Corps. This time, they decided, they had to aim higher.

The conflict began with a [new policy](#) from the Corps: It says to do the work, it needs permanent easements from the property owners along the beach. Those easements would include some beach and dunes, but also some private backyards. Many owners don't want to sign their land away.

It created a bind for Pinellas County, which has plenty of reasons to want to replenish its beaches: They're a recreational asset for residents and the heart of the county's tourism industry. They provide crucial habitats for endangered sea turtles and birds. And in the event of a major storm, the beach provides "the first line of defense," said Kelli Levy, the county's public works director.

Long, who has spent decades in state and local government, started reaching out to friends and acquaintances with White House connections. Last month, she met for a few minutes with President Joe Biden during his visit for Tampa and told him that Pinellas needed help saving its beaches. Soon, her connections yielded an offer for a [video chat](#) with a White House official.

"I said, 'We're coming up there to see you, and I don't want to just have a Zoom call,'" Long remembered. "I said, 'We have to have eyeball-to-eyeball conversation.'"

So on March 6, Long, Kennedy and Levy—along with Brian Lowack, the county's intergovernmental liaison—giddily found themselves in a West Wing conference room. Leading the White House contingent was its own intergovernmental affairs director, Julie Chavez Rodriguez, who's also a senior adviser and assistant to Biden.

For more than an hour, Chavez Rodriguez and her team listened while Pinellas officials explained the conundrum. More than half of the property owners along the Sand Key project area have yet to provide easements. Though the county has promised that private property will remain private, some residents have said they fear the easements would make their backyards into public spaces. (The Sand Key project notably excludes ritzy Belleair Shore, notorious for keeping its beach private.)

Officials, including Levy, were tasked with trying to convince the public that it was a necessary measure, but it was hard to fault some of the objections. Not only had the Corps never required permanent easements before, but some of the easements it now wanted were on or inland of protected dunes, land it couldn't touch anyway.

Levy said the Pinellas group also emphasized the many important roles beaches play in Pinellas, especially in storms. A storm the size of Hurricane Ian would wreak havoc on Pinellas; a direct hit without the protection of the beaches would be even worse.

"If that beach were not there, what would happen to all the public and private infrastructure out there?" she said in an interview. "What would be the losses?"

The losses may already be coming. The Corps allowed a one-time exception to its policy so the 2018 renourishment could go on as scheduled, but it hasn't budged on this cycle. Even if it had a change of heart today, Levy said, it would be 2025 or 2026 before Sand Key got new sand.

Meanwhile, Sand Key has been critically eroded, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection reported last year. At Indian Rocks Beach, where Kennedy noted the disappearing shore, 29% of the sand pumped in 2018 remains, Levy said. In North Redington Beach, it's 0%. There,

seawater has begun to infiltrate [water pipes](#), Long said, posing a slower but major threat to local infrastructure.

The White House officials seemed receptive, Long said, and they quickly followed up to ask for more information. The Pinellas contingent doesn't know what will happen next, though Long said she expects to hear some news soon.

"It gives us hope," she said. "I feel like we've moved the dial."

The next day, waiting to board a plane home, the Pinellas group saw a familiar face: Bishop Emeritus Robert Lynch of the Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg. They hoped it was one more good sign.

If enlisting the president of the United States doesn't work, they might have to appeal to an even higher power.

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