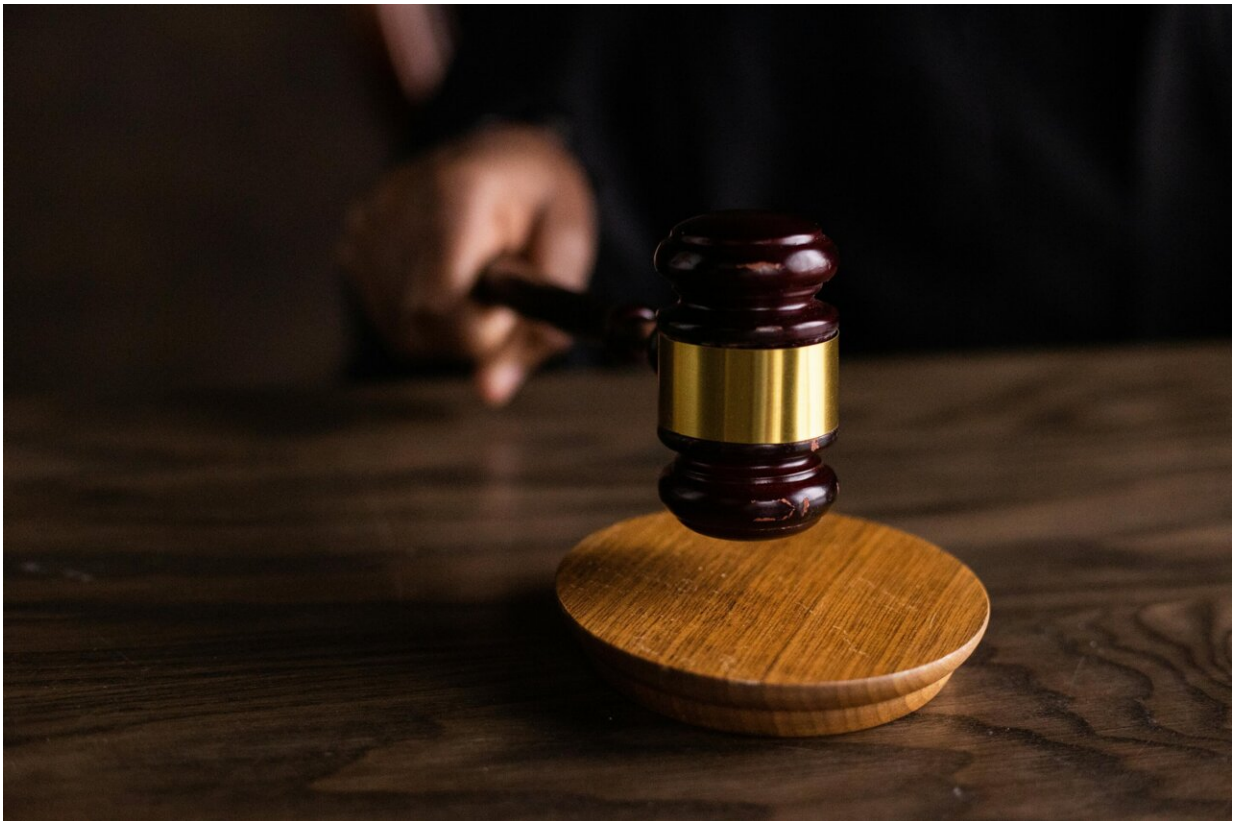


Change threatening coastal Native American sites cut from NC bill

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Credit: KATRIN BOLOVTSOVA from Pexels

A controversial bill that would have allowed developers to build on archaeological sites in some environmentally sensitive coastal areas was overhauled on June 19.

Language that would have allowed builders to disturb archaeological resources in the course of development in the coastal Areas of Environmental Concern was removed from House Bill 385 entirely. After being introduced earlier this month, that original proposal met widespread opposition from Native Americans in North Carolina and the state's Department of Natural and Cultural Resources.

Under the changes proposed by Sen. Norm Sanderson, a Pamlico County Republican, the N.C. Department of Natural and Cultural Resources would need to inform potential purchasers of land in those areas whether there is a potentially significant archaeological site on the property. DNCR would also need to seek funding from state, federal or private sources to purchase archaeological or historically significant sites it identifies in those areas.

"The idea to me is, to save all we can and not have to find it during development," Sanderson told The News & Observer

The Department of Natural and Cultural Resources still harbors concerns about the updated language, Schorr Johnson, a department spokesman, said in a statement.

"While an improvement from the original proposal, the Office of State Archaeology already provides information to property owners and prospective property owners about archaeological resources on their property. The new language attempts to codify that practice while also undermining archaeological protections. We look forward to continuing to work with the legislature on this proposal," Johnson said.

Central to the original debate was a 21-acre portion of the Bridge View development in Cedar Point, a Carteret County community bordering Bogue Banks near the eastern shore of the White Oak River. In the case of Bridge View, development was halted on the sound-side portion of

the site before it could begin.

As part of the standard Coastal Area Management Act permit review process, the Office of State Archaeology recommended further exploration because of two sites that were discovered in the area in the 1970s. A survey of 16 trenches covering a total of 1.3 acres of the site found more than 2,000 artifacts, including 11 different human burial sites.

The original provision allowing development to "incidentally" disturb [archaeological sites](#) was included in one of nine amendments to HB 385 introduced at a June 5 meeting of the Senate's Agriculture, Energy and Environment committee. At the time, Sen. Michael Lazzara, an Onslow County Republican, said the Bridge View developers had already spent hundreds of thousands conducting surveys on the Carteret County site.

Under the revised legislation, developers like Bridge View's Cedar Point Developers, LLC, would be able to ask the Office of State Archaeology whether it believes there are culturally sensitive sites on the land during the purchase process. If the Office of State Archaeology said it doesn't know of an issue with a site, it wouldn't be able to restrict development for a period of three years.

If a developer uncovers an archaeological site while working on a site, Sanderson added, they would still need to pause all activity under existing state law.

"I'm 25% Native American myself, and I didn't do this to try to destroy burial grounds," Sanderson said.

The changes wouldn't immediately help the developers behind Bridge View, Sanderson added. While the funding provision seems to offer a way for them to offload the 21-acre site in question, the legislation

doesn't include state money that could be used to purchase it or other archaeologically important land.

"If there is a budget, we're not going to go back and add that right now. And so that would have to be a future endeavor to put some money in a fund to begin to be able to draw off of it," Sanderson said.

The Judiciary Committee did not immediately vote on the amendments but could do so Thursday or next Tuesday, said Sen. Danny Britt, a Robeson County Republican and the committee's chairman.

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