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P L A N N I N G

The North Carolina Model
Town Loves Gown
Beyond Operation Bootstrap

PLANNING
CONTENTS

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6 **The Missionaries of Chapel Hill.** Outreach is the byword at the University of North Carolina, reports Pat Verner.

14 **The Little Town That Could.** Nags Head, North Carolina, does its all to hold back the forces of nature—and of man.

18 **Beyond Operation Bootstrap.** Philip Langdon describes Puerto Rico's latest economic strategy.

25 **Town Loves Gown.** Universities make good neighbors, says Jerry DeMuth.

25

14

18

30 **News**
Recycling, saving Salt Lake.

32 **Letters**
Gotham kudos.

33 **Planners Library**
Worlds apart.

35 **APA News**
Conference report.

39 **Consultant Directory**

46 **Viewpoint**
Farmers need help with soil conservation plans.

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By Sylvia Lewis

The Little Town That Could

What one North Carolina resort town is doing to keep the tides at bay.

Nags Head may be the planningest little town in North Carolina. This community of 1,100 has either tried or considered nearly every planning scheme dreamed up by the aficionados: PUDs, large-lot zoning, impact fees, and height and bulk restrictions (in place); a hurricane mitigation strategy (in the works); transfer of development rights (at the talking stage).

According to many observers, Nags Head has also set a standard for local planning along the North Carolina coast. It's no coincidence, they say, that surrounding Dare County last year spent $100,000 on a carrying capacity study after seeing what Nags Head had produced on its own. Further, hurricane mitigation strategies, which figure prominently in the Nags Head land-use plan, are now being included in the plans of every other coastal community—by order of the state's coastal management agency. While the state didn't necessarily follow Nags Head's lead, it's noteworthy that the town had addressed an issue of regional importance.

Part of the reason for all this activity is that Nags Head, like other communities on North Carolina's Outer Banks, is literally built on shifting sands. The Outer Banks are barrier islands wedged between two massive—and powerful—bodies of water, sounds and bays to the west and the Atlantic Ocean to the east. Wave and wind sculpt the islands at will, with occasional disastrous results to manmade objects like houses, roads, and bridges.

Nags Head's interest in planning has been growing for the last decade. "After I was here a relatively short time, I saw that this place would experience great changes, and I wanted a hand in guiding them," says Donald Bryan, a retired Air Force colonel who moved to Nags Head in 1972 and has served as the town's mayor since 1978.

Bryan and other Nags Head residents (half of them 45 years or older, many of them retired military people) saw the benefits of planning early on. By 1980, when the town's first land-use plan was completed, many full-time residents had already decided that they wanted to retain the small-town atmosphere that had drawn them to Nags Head in the first place. In 1981, the town hired the first full-time planner to work in Dare County; he apparently set to work with a vengeance—with the help of the state and of friends at the University of North Carolina.

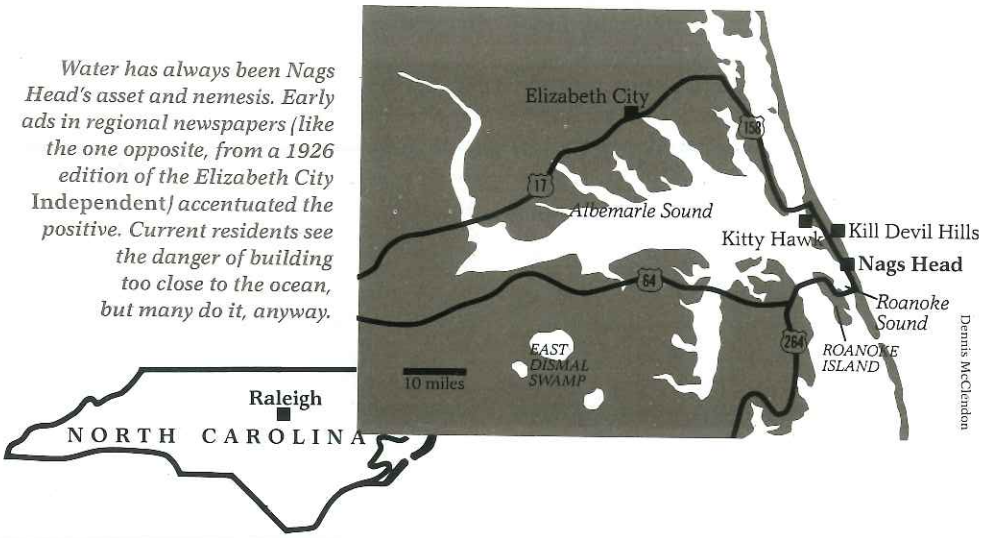
North Carolina Dept. of Cultural Resources

Shifting sands

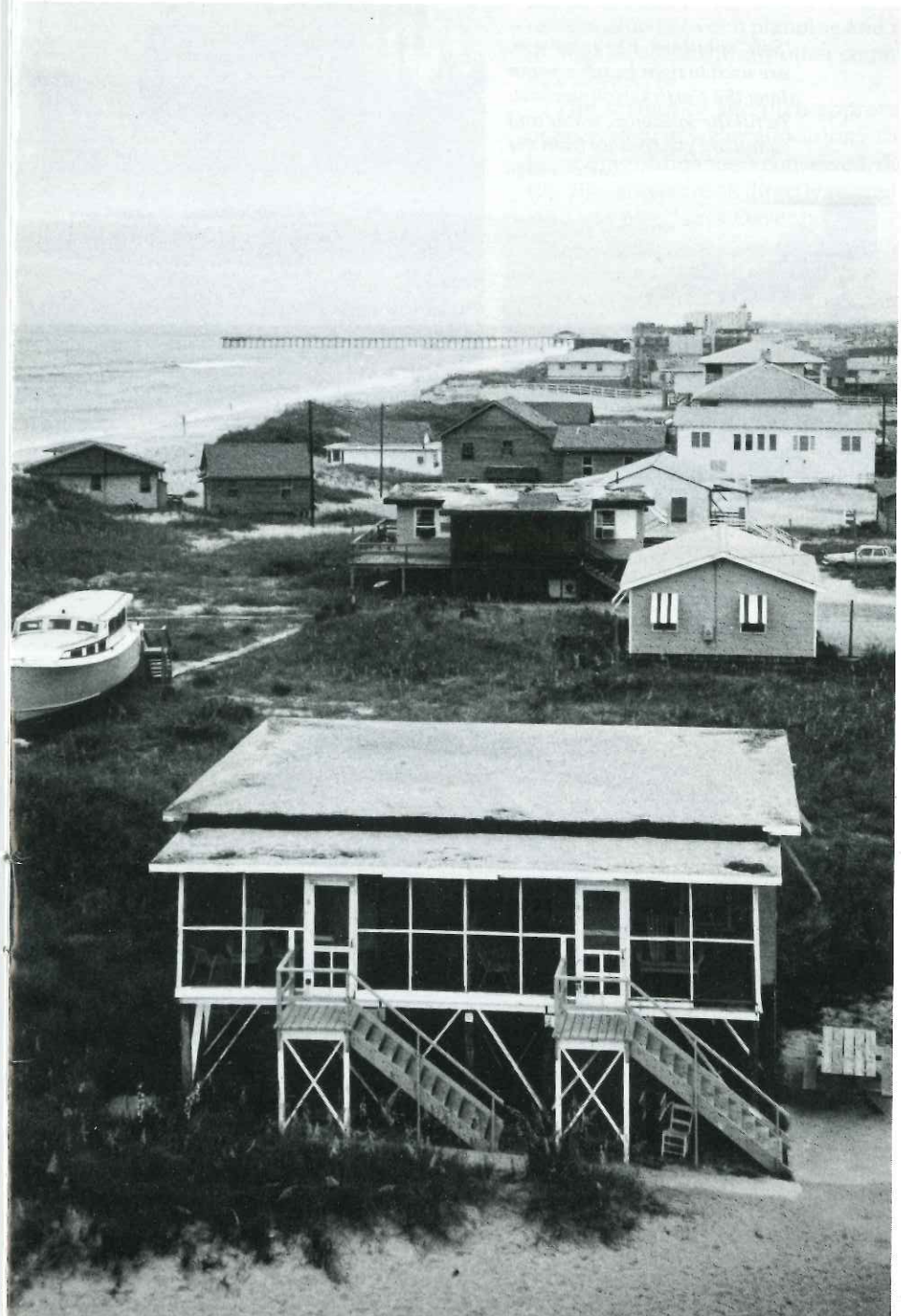
The area around Nags Head has a distinguished history. It's the site of the continent's first, though ill-fated, English settlement and of many Civil War battles (the Union warship *Monitor* sank offshore). And it was here that the Wright brothers soared above the dunes in the world's first successful airplanes.

Still, the dunes and everything on them are fragile. Beach erosion is a constant headache, especially for those who have built at the very lip of the Atlantic. In some parts of Nags Head, threatened houses are dragged back from the foredunes; when that's impossible, the houses are sacrificed

Water has always been Nags Head's asset and nemesis. Early ads in regional newspapers (like the one opposite, from a 1926 edition of the Elizabeth City Independent*) accentuated the positive. Current residents see the danger of building too close to the ocean, but many do it, anyway.*



Dennis McClendon



Sylvia Lewis

to the ocean. Groins, jetties, and other breakwaters have been banned—as indeed they have been banned along the entire North Carolina coast.

Despite these drawbacks—or perhaps because of them—oceanfront property remains the most valuable, and Nags Head remains a target of development. Adding to the pressure is the fact that the town occupies a strategic location, only 80 miles south of Norfolk and Virginia Beach and within easy driving distance of Washington, D.C. It's also the first seaside community one reaches by bridge from the mainland. Except for the small towns scattered on the northernmost islands, much of the Outer Banks— including nearly everything to the south of Nags Head—is national seashore. Small towns are scattered on the northernmost islands.

These factors account in part for the growth spurt in Nags Head, whose year-round population grew by 146 percent (from 414 to 1,020) between 1970 and 1980. At the peak of the summer season, the population of this little resort reaches 30,000. There to service them are run-of-the mill motels, restaurants, and shops—plus a nine-mile beachfront that now has 33 public access points.

Not counting a state park and a forest reserve within its boundaries, the town occupies 7.2 square miles and has about 4,000 dwelling units and 2,600 undeveloped platted lots. Planners say that the town's permanent population could swell to as much as 6,000 by the end of the century. It was the recognition by town officials of the potentially harmful effects of growth that led to the decision to hire a full-time planner.

Taking charge

Some planning had already taken place. The North Carolina Coastal Area Management program requires coastal communities to update their land-use plans every five years, and Nags Head and its neighbors had complied with the help of circuit riders they had hired.

But Collins was the first full-time planner and the first to work in Dare County. He spent nearly five years in Nags Head before moving to Dover, New Hampshire, last year. In some ways, he followed standard procedure: Ask residents what they want to do with their town, write a land-use plan based on the answers, and devise ordinances based on the plan. Then came creative license.

Instead of holding a few hearings to take the public pulse, the town mailed out 4,000 seven-page questionnaires. Survey forms were sent to everyone living or owning land or a business in the town; they generated a

60 percent response. Instead of stopping with a standard land-use inventory, Collins put together a carrying capacity study to figure out how much development the town could support. The study included computerized spreadsheets showing how development would affect sewer and water resources, police and fire services, recreation facilities, and so on.

From the data—and from the town's constant refrain, "We don't want to be another Virginia Beach" (that is, choked with beachfront hotels), Collins concluded that some growth management policies might be in order—and town officials agreed. Here are some of the policies they adopted in their 1985 land-use plan—the town's second plan:

- *Move back from the Atlantic.* "Our policy is to retreat rather than to fight the ocean," says Mayor Don Bryan, the ex-military officer. This means no hard structures for beach protection; it means that bigger buildings like hotels should be located west of the beach road (which is only about 100 yards from the high tide line); and it means that new houses should be built well behind the foredunes.
- *Build only to the limit of the town's capacity.* Because fresh water is scarce, people who want to build in Nags Head must compete for tap permits, paying a $2,000 permit fee for each single-family unit or its equivalent. (Half the fee is put aside to fund expansion of the town's water system.) Further, the town annually issues new permits for only 132 single-family units and duplexes, 57 multifamily and motel/hotel units, and 25 commercial units.

The competition for water taps takes the form of a point system. Conceptual site plans are graded according to conformance with the land-use plan. Developers with the highest grades are given tentative water allocations and then may submit their final plans to the planning board. Town officials say that the quality of site plans has definitely improved in the 18 months since the water allocation system began.

The water tap fee is Nags Head's only impact fee to date, but the town has permission from the state legislature to impose other impact fees as needed (for roads or emergency services, for example). For now, Dare County communities and the city of Raleigh are the only North Carolina municipalities that are allowed to impose local impact fees.

- *Stay residential.* "Nags Head does not wish to become a regional commercial center," says the land-use plan. As a result, the town is reducing the amount of land zoned for commercial uses and will prohibit most industries.
- *Don't do anything to encourage major growth.* The most telling policy in the land-use plan—a policy that town officials wrestled with—is the one outlawing a public sewer system. Nine-tenths of the town's dwelling units have septic systems; the rest use packaged treatment facilities.

"A lot of people on the North Carolina coast advocate a public sewer," says Bill Collins, "but then density would explode because that more than anything else is the limiting factor on growth in this area. I remember vividly the workshop in which the planning board said, 'We don't want a public sewer because it would increase density.' I was proud of them for putting it in writing and adopting a policy."

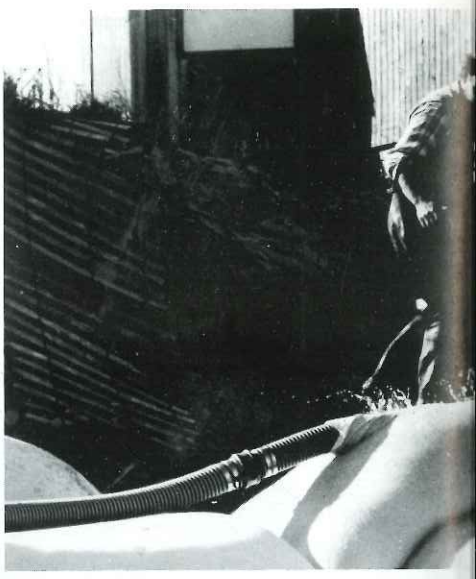
A little help from friends

Collins credits other people for providing a supportive atmosphere for planning and for sharing their ideas. Town officials took an open-minded attitude: "If no one in a 200-mile radius had tried it, who cared?" And they came through with money (usually from state grants in the low four figures) so that Collins could hire consultants for individual tasks.

That's where the University of North Carolina came in. The journalism school at

"Soft" solutions, like sandbags, are used to fight beach erosion along the North Carolina coast. To fill the sandbags, water and sand are pumped up from the water's edge.

Coastland Times



North Carolina Dept. of Cultural Resources

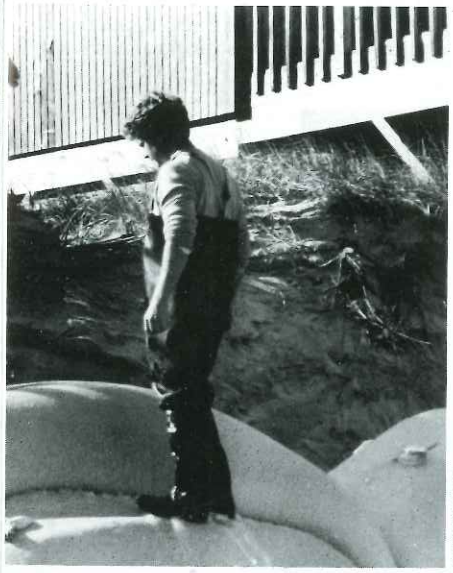
Chapel Hill helped with the citizens' survey. Lawyers at the Institute of Government spent hours on the phone with Collins when he was writing the Nags Head water allocation ordinance. And David Brower, associate director of the university's Center for Urban and Regional Studies, was hired as a very part-time consultant to work on the carrying capacities and hurricane mitigation policies.

Brower is becoming something of a growth management guru (he has written two APA Planners Press books on the topic with David Godschalk of the university's planning department). He also spends a lot of his free time on the North Carolina coast and has served as a consultant to other Dare County communities besides Nags Head.

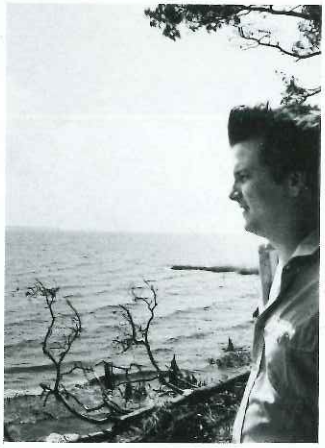
He and Collins became a two-man planning team. "This was not the case of a consultant plopping down a document and saying, 'Here's what I've done for you.' I was an extension of Bill's staff," Brower says. What that meant was lots of brainstorming—to the point that the two men can't sort out where one person's ideas ended and the other's began.

At any rate, what they concocted—and the town eventually adopted as policies or ordinances—has made life a little easier for other planners. Stephen Davenport, who has worked throughout North Carolina and who replaced Collins as the Nags Head planning director, says that he sees a tighter relationship between planning and zoning in Nags Head than in any other community he's worked in.

"The system of site plan approval, the point system in water allocations, the way the zoning ordinance is conceived, the density allocations are all directly related to the land-use plan," says Davenport.



Coastland Times



Sylvia Lewis

The original beach houses of Nags Head (left) were built after the Civil War. Their weathered look and big porches set the style for the Outer Banks. Bill Collins (above) was the first planning director of Nags Head.

Building a tight ship

Still, lots of work remains. Hurricane mitigation and fiscal impact analysis are on the front burner. The town's biggest planned unit development—with a total of 700 units—is under way with the construction of a golf course. About 30 site plans for multifamily and commercial developments are in various stages of completion, and Steve Davenport (with a staff of two code enforcement officers and two building inspectors) must police them all.

And then there is the future—particularly, what happens when a $10 million desalination plant is completed in the county in 1989. According to project engineer David Todd, with the engineering firm of Black and Veatch in Asheboro, the plant will draw brackish water from an aquifer in the northeast part of the state and purify it through reverse osmosis (which removes the dissolved solids). Five million gallons of potable water per day will be added to the capacity of Dare County and its partners in the project, the towns of Kill Devil Hills and Nags Head. The Nags Head allotment will be two million gallons a day—a 56 percent increase in the town's fresh water supply.

Todd says that the Dare County desalination plant will be one of the largest in the nation (it is also one of a very few such plants). To Nags Head, the plant will mean abundant water—and the end of the competitions for water allocations.

Despite the development that is bound to occur as the result of the added water supply, the chances are good that Nags Head will continue on its present course. Like all converts, this town approaches its new religion with particular zeal.

Forest primeval

A recent clue to the future is afforded by the example of Nags Head Woods. This 1,400-acre, largely undeveloped patch of woods lies on the western side of the island, on Roanoke Sound. It is the most diverse maritime forest on the East Coast—home to several species of flora and fauna that have chosen this windy spot to make their last stand. Some species refuse to live any farther south, others any farther north.

In the late 1970s, the Nature Conservancy, a national environmental group, targeted Nags Head Woods as one of the top 10 critical natural areas in the U.S. The Conservancy bought 400 acres there (the Nags Head Woods Ecological Preserve); it manages another 300 acres belonging to the town of Nags Head.

It happens that another 650 acres lie within the town boundaries. On this privately owned land stand a small farm, three houses, and another four or five houses under construction. For years the private owners have resisted zoning changes that would increase the minimum acreage for building sites.

In March the town created a special environmental district for its portion of Nags Head Woods. Anyone who wants to build there must now have twice as much land as in the past: approximately two acres per dwelling unit instead of one. Six years earlier, Bill Collins had suggested a similar downzoning scheme—without results. "I went to the planning board and got beaten to the ground," he says, cheerfully fessing up to a rare failure.

The next item on the Nags Head agenda is hurricanes, specifically how to get people off the island during a storm and how to deal with the aftermath. The task is daunting: to prevent major damage to the lives and property of those who like to live on the edge. The people of Nags Head may not be miracle workers, but they're bound to figure out some interesting ways to cope.

Sylvia Lewis is *Planning*'s editor and associate publisher.