

An Interview with Allen G. Ten Broek

By

Erik J. Olsen, P.E.

Al Ten Broek is the rare type of gifted individual who, if embroiled in a highly technical problem or controversy, can assimilate the legal, engineering, environmental, political, and other relevant facts given to him and articulate their combined essence in such a rational and convincing manner that he can overcome negativism or opposition in almost any forum. Accordingly, both his demeanor and positive approach to problem-solving has allowed him to not only be highly successful in his career as a developer and business entrepreneur, but also to extend his leadership capabilities to the resolution of public interest issues in the state of Florida. More specifically, his foresight, focus and political savvy guided the Florida Shore and Beach Preservation Association (FSBPA) in achieving landmark legislation directed toward a sustainable, comprehensive beach management program for the state. Today, this program serves as the model for other states still wrestling with the multitude of associated complex issues of beach management — financial, technical, and political.

I first met Al Ten Broek in 1979 when I was the coastal engineer “anointed” to design and permit the South Seas Plantation Beach Restoration Project. The latter was extraordinary at the time since it was the first nongovernmental-sponsored beach restoration project proposed within the state of Florida. As such, its physical limits of improvement were dictated by the shorefront of a small yet popular and charming coastal barrier resort located on Captiva Island in Lee County, on Florida’s Gulf coast. Located within a region of greatly celebrated environmental sensitivity, it was no small wonder that the state permit for the project was immediately challenged by the three largest environmental coalitions within the state.



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Throughout a testy administrative hearing process, Al’s strategy, clarity, and uncanny ability to rationalize the public interest elements of the project (with the assistance of engineering and superb legal support) greatly contributed to the successful outcome.

The project was subsequently constructed and financed through the first application of a Municipal Services Taxing Unit (MSTU) for purposes of erosion control in the state of Florida — no small feat in itself. Since that time, other similar nongovernmental ownership groups have taken advantage of the important precedent set at South Seas Plantation. In the 1980s, it was anecdotally reported that there were two beach restoration projects acknowledged by Orin Pilkey as “successful” in his view — the federally constructed Miami Beach shore protection project and the South Seas Plantation beach fill.

Subsequently, Al’s interest in addressing beach preservation issues elsewhere in the state resulted in his election to the board of FSBPA and eventual long-term

assignment as chairman and influential chairman emeritus. During his tenure, his leadership and direction resulted in the achievement of political successes in the Florida Legislature symbolized by the programs which today serve as the basis and platform for beach improvement projects statewide.

In an attempt to allow Al to tell it like it really happened, I will defer to the following interview questions.

■ **As a developer and business entrepreneur by background, just how did you first get involved in beach erosion issues?**

To begin, I’m pleased and honored to have received the Morrrough P. O’Brien Award and feel privileged to share the company of its many distinguished recipients. It was a very satisfying conclusion to my focused efforts to establish long-term beach management and associated dedicated funding for the state of Florida.

I first got involved with beach issues out of necessity — the beach adjacent to the resort my company owned and operated on Captiva Island was daily receding and washing away in large quantities, during even the most modest of onshore winds and storms. Needless to say, a beach resort without a beach is a non-starter. In fact, it’s an economic disaster. We had to do something.

That “something” turned out to be a privately sponsored, privately funded beach restoration project for the two miles of shoreline adjacent to our resort. While we would have preferred to work through the various government entities devoted to these matters, both time and local controversy over the efficacy of beach restoration dictated that we proceed on our own.

■ **In 1980 most beach erosion projects nationally were authorized by Congress and constructed through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. How did you and your partners address the funding of a nonfederal project, and particularly one with participation ranging from single-family residences to weekly interval ownership?**

The key to this was education and transparency. In addition to our resort hotel operations, we were developing and selling homesites, condominiums, and timeshare condominiums, some on the beach, some located inland or on the bay side of the property. While all constituents agreed that the beach needed to be restored, virtually everyone had their own view as to how the cost should be shared.

One thing was obvious to me — unless our company was willing to bear a numerically disproportionate share of the cost, it would be impossible to gain the support of others. So we opted to do so, and proceeded to work with our property owners to develop a cost-sharing formula that, as best as possible, was perceived to be fair and rational.

The other key to this was to be able to finance the project in order to spread the cost to all parties over a number of years. We were able to do this with the support of our local erosion control district and our county commission through the establishment of a municipal services taxing unit.

■ **What led you to ultimately get involved with the Florida Shore and Beach Preservation Association?**

First, the Association was very supportive of my South Seas project and I very much appreciated that. Second, as I participated in Association conferences and got to know and understand the membership, I grew to admire the dedication and professionalism that were the hallmark of all involved. Finally, I saw a void in terms of dealing with the politics of beach programs and projects and felt that I could help fill that void.

■ **It is widely acknowledged that under your guidance the state of**

Florida passed landmark legislation regarding its beach program. Could you discuss and detail for our readers the goals, history, timing and ultimate successes achieved?

Up and into the 1980s, Florida's history with beach projects was largely related to federally authorized projects or projects with strong local government sponsorship. There was competition for funds, and only theoretical attention paid to coordination among communities. Yet the sand did not know or respect political boundaries. It was clear that a comprehensive beach management program was needed on a statewide basis — and our Association set a goal to accomplish that through the legislative process. I, along with the many dedicated Association members who participated in that process, was extremely pleased when we accomplished that goal.

The second major need was money to support studies and projects. Again, the Florida process was to annually appropriate from state general revenue — always a political crapshoot. An adequate, reliable, predictable, dedicated funding source would put the meat on the bones of the beach management program that was needed to insure that Florida's principal recreation and upland protection resource would be there — year after year. At the governor's request, I was pleased to chair a statewide task force on this subject that resulted in the legislation to provide dedicated state funding, and then to work with our members to get it passed by the Legislature. I feel this, coupled with comprehensive beach management, truly put Florida at the forefront of beach preservation in the nation.

■ **From your perspective, what strategies are available for an affected group of property owners, and even small governmental entities, to address and resolve shore protection problems?**

The first strategy is do your homework — and engage qualified professionals to help you. Whether it's to garner community support, government support, or financial support, a solid game plan is a must. Second, communicate — and be

transparent so there is a true understanding of your goals and why and how you are trying to accomplish them. Third, build alliances. Those that help you today are the ones you should support tomorrow — when it is their turn.

■ **Are you still involved today in coastal issues or related endeavors?**

Not like I used to be — but still to a relevant level. The Association has honored me as chairman emeritus so I feel a responsibility to stay informed. And I clearly stand ready to assist if there is an issue where I might be helpful.

■ **Where do you see the next major challenges for our coasts and its stewardship?**

From a technical standpoint, sand sourcing and sand management. This needs to remain integral to comprehensive beach management. From a political standpoint, it's the issue of private versus public property rights and access to the beach. All parties need to keep an open mind on this subject.

■ **What's your favorite beach and/or favorite type of beach environment?**

As corny as it sounds, my favorite beach is the one I'm on when I'm fortunate enough to find some beach time in my life. I'll always have a soft spot for Captiva Island. And my real pleasure is seeing families enjoy the beach while, at the same time, knowing that both public and private property owners are being protected by it.

■ **Where do you like to go for vacation?**

Resort development and operation is my business. I like to vacation at resorts so I can see how others do it — to learn from them — and enjoy myself in the process.

Erik J. Olsen, P.E. is the principal and founder of the coastal engineering firm of Olsen Associates Inc. located in Jacksonville, Florida. He is a former director of the ASBPA and a director emeritus of the FSBPA.