

Coastal Resources Management Council

Coastal Briefings



The Coastal Resources Management Council: A Brief History

It's been well over 30 years since a concerted interest was first shown in the future of Rhode Island's shoreline. The frightful coastal damage visited by Hurricane Carol in 1954 prompted a study of the coast aimed at finding ways to protect it from future storms. A broader inquiry, underwritten by both federal and state governments, followed. The second study zeroed in on the need for comprehensive program for planning, developing and regulating uses of the shoreline. It recommended that state, local, and federal agencies as well as private interest groups coordinate such a plan.

In the late 1960's worried citizens were urging management even more strongly on the governor of the state. By then, tiny Rhode Island was close to being the most densely populated state in the nation, with the heaviest pressure being put on the coastline. As one group's report pointed out, Narragansett Bay and the entire coast have tremendous economic and esthetic potential; new uses, some good and some bad, will continually suggest themselves. And as people and kinds of activity multiply at the shore, conflicts of interest and intolerable stress on the resource inevitably increase.

And so in 1969, the Governor appointed a Technical Committee of nine to draft plans for a mechanism or an organization that could manage the resources and also coordinate research, development and conservation activities.

The committee began its work by contacting agencies, groups and individuals in any way involved with the coastline. Its aim was to find out how they used it, whether and how their activities conflicted, their plans for future uses or expansion and their viewpoints on the problems and potential of the area.

A subcommittee was formed to study legal jurisdiction in the coastal area from the state's jurisdiction out into the Atlantic to the specific authority of federal, state and local regulatory agencies. Based on all information gathered, as well as background research which the staff of the Statewide Planning Program provided, legislation was drafted a year later to create a coastal management mechanism.

At that time the idea of managing a resource was a new and not universally popular one. The legislation found enough opposition to die in committee of the 1970 session of the General Assembly. The Governor's response was to reconstitute and expand the committee to make it more broadly representative. The new task force followed the original group's approach, but its expanded representation made it more successful in communicating and working with towns and municipalities, many of them worried by what they saw as threats to their authority.

The result was legislation which passed the 1971 General Assembly to establish a Coastal Resources Management Council of 17 members. They are appointed by the Governor, the lieutenant Governor and the Speaker of the House. A key to the legislation's success was that it ensures the representation of a wide range of interests and viewpoint. It specifies that:

- * Two members be state Representatives, one representing a coastal municipality; and two be state Senators, both representing coastal municipalities.
- * Seven members be private citizens, five of them from coastal municipalities.

- * Two members be elected or appointed officials of local government from municipalities of less than 25,000 population, one being a coastal municipality; and two be members of coastal municipalities of more than 25,000 population.
- * The Directors of the Departments of Health and of Natural Resources, the state agencies most concerned with resource conservation and control of air and water pollution, be ex-officio members.

The Council took office in August, 1971, with jurisdiction over all the state's coastal waters to the mean high water mark and six coastal land areas and activities. It was charged with management of long-range planning for all the resources within these boundaries - a tremendous assignment.

But it had an effective back-up team for the job: the Statewide Planning Program; the Department of Natural Resources; and, the URI Coastal Resources Center. Staff at Statewide Planning, with longstanding experience in land use planning for the state, provided background and research material and a wide range of technical support. Council staff was drawn from the Coastal Resources Division (the one-time Division of Rivers and Harbors) of the Department of Natural Resources. DNR also made its biologist available and had the responsibility of enforcing Council regulations. The marine-research-oriented Coastal Resources Center, established at the University of Rhode Island in 1971, had a primary responsibility to determine the current condition of every coastal resource included in the management plan. This included everything from shellfish to sand dunes, from port facilities to recreational areas. It also had access to the considerable amount of marine research going on at URI.

The Council wasn't the only group interested in the management of our coast. Government agencies on every level, as well as regional organizations, were, (and still are) involved in various ways in its affairs, and the Council continues to make every effort to keep all informed and involved in the planning process. In cases where state agencies or local governments also have legal jurisdiction, they make the initial decision on applications.

Nor is Rhode Island the only state determined to preserve the character of its shores - though it was one of the first to take any action. Every coastal state recognized, as we did, that effective management of an irreplaceable resource was already overdue. And so did the federal government. In 1972, Congress passed a Coastal Zone Management Act which created an Office of Coastal Zone Management. It is administered by NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) in the Department of Commerce. Its purpose is to create a working and financial partnership between the federal government and the coastal states.

Since no two states have exactly the same problems and priorities, the federal government leaves it to each of them, working with local governments and private citizens, to develop programs for the best management of their shorelines under certain broad national guidelines. Its role is primarily to help the state and federal agencies involved coordinate their efforts and to provide technical and financial support. Matching federal funds in the form of planning and management grants are available to coastal states as they produce plans that meet the requirements of the Coastal Zone Management Act and set in motion the machinery to carry them out.

These are considerations included in every state's management plan:

- * Its areas of particular concern. In other words, the hot spots - because of geography, historic significance, economic or environmental value or potential - that need individual management attention.
- * Its uses of particular concern. How do the people of the state want to use their coast? What are their special needs? Ensuring the best interests of the state and its people is what coastal management is about.

- * The national interest. Some coastal uses, such as for international shipping ports, military installations or power plant sites, go beyond state boundaries. These present or potential uses for the benefit of the country or the region have to be taken into account.
- * Legal Considerations. The network of laws affecting the shoreline need to be analyzed to find how authorities and jurisdictions overlap and how the best working relationship can be developed.
- * Inventorying coastal resources. Everything that exists within the coastal area, whether it's a form of life, a use or a geographical feature, must be inventoried to be included in the state's management plan. And further, its current status or problems need to be analyzed as a basis for deciding on best future uses for the resource.

These are also key elements of the Rhode Island's coastal zone management program. Each was addressed and incorporated into what we know today as the Coastal Resources Management Program.

Narragansett Bay and the rest of Rhode Island's coast are the state's most valuable natural resources. The job of the Coastal Resources Management Council is to make sure their uses are wisely directed and their development guided in the best interests of the state and its people.

Every Rhode Islander has a stake in the coastline. It determines the quality of life for all of us. Our job as citizens is to keep informed about how it is managed and what is planned for its future.

The Council is eager to hear your reactions and welcomes your comments and suggestions.



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