



**For Immediate Release**

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## **Stacking the Deck: Last-Minute Move Leads to Deal on Groins**

OCEAN – The new crew in Raleigh is up to an old trick: Stacking the deck to get its way.

Republicans in the N.C. General Assembly have been deadlocked over competing bills to allow small jetties, called groins, on the state's beaches to protect private property. The N.C. House version of the bill is more restrictive than the one favored by the state Senate.

Groins, jetties, seawalls and other types of hard structure aren't currently allowed on the state's beaches because they can destroy the beach by increasing erosion.

A committee of legislators has been meeting since the bills passed this spring to try and iron out the differences, but the majority of House members have remained firm in their support of the House bill.

Things were going nowhere when supporters of building more groins than allowed in the House bill came upon a simple fix: Pack the committee with like-minded members.

That's what Thom Tillis, the speaker of the House, apparently did. The Mecklenburg Republican announced Tuesday night that he was adding two new members to the House contingent on the committee. They presumably voted to allow more groins. That version of the bill now has just enough votes in the committee to send it along to both chambers of the legislature for approval.

"This is politics as usual, but that doesn't make it any less detestable," said Todd Miller, the executive director of the N.C. Coastal Federation. "The last-minute maneuver makes this a shameful process."

The federation, the largest coastal environmental group in the state, has lobbied against allowing groins on our beaches because of their cost and the environmental damage they do. A public opinion poll commissioned by the federation last month found that most voters in the state don't want hard structures, like jetties, built on the beaches and they certainly don't want to pay for them.

“This is an effort to protect a handful of people who built homes near inlets, which are among the most dangerous places to build,” Miller said, “Both the bills that the committee is considering are bad, but the House version is vastly better than the free-for-all that the Senate would allow.”

The House bill at least limits the damage and protects local taxpayers. That bill would limit the number of groins to three and, in most cases, would require a referendum before a beach community could build one. The Senate version would allow as many as two groins at each inlet along the coast and contains no provision for a local vote.

Whenever the House and Senate pass different versions of the same bill and then can't agree on either one, legislative leaders can appoint what's called a conference committee to come up with a version that both chambers could then approve. Five senators and a like number of representatives were selected to work on the groin bills. Legislative rules require that the compromise version of the bill must receive the majority of votes of each contingent for it to be sent to the legislature for approval.

That presented a problem. While the majority of senators on the committee supported a compromise to allow four groins, three of the five House members wouldn't go along. Reps. Carolyn Justice, R-Pender; Ruth Samuelson, R-Mecklenburg; and William Wainwright, D-Craven, have remained firm in their support of the House bill, which would limit the number to three. The other House committee members, Reps. Pat McElraft, R-Carteret, and Frank Iller, R-Brunswick, sided with their Senate counterparts.

There things stood until Tillis added Reps. Phil Shepard, R-Onslow, and Bill Owens, D-Camden, to the committee. Owens is among the five House Democrats who sided with Republicans to give their proposed state budget a presumably veto-proof majority.

The committee's conference report hasn't yet been made public, but the federation understands that Owens and Shepard voted to allow the additional groin. That version of the bill now has a 4-3 majority of the House members on the committee.

Problem solved.

“We're disappointed that the legislature didn't show real leadership to protect our beaches,” noted Miller. “That battle now moves to local communities where the federation will work to ensure that these ugly piles of rock don't damage the beaches we all cherish.”