



Peninsula Citizens for Sustainable Development

General Delivery, Placencia Peninsula, Belize

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Notes from Meeting on Construction Works within the 66' Reserve and on Beds of Seas and Other Waterways Placencia Village Community Center, 6 PM, 18 February 2009

PACT is funding a program to strengthen governmental oversight of construction projects involving the 66' reserve, sea beds and beds of all other waterways and water bodies, such as the Placencia Lagoon. Sustainable coastal development is the overarching purpose of the PACT program.

Docks/piers, bulkheads, groynes, seawalls, marinas, land reclamation/creation, fish farms and over-the-water bars and restaurants are examples of the kinds of projects to be addressed by permitting procedures and guidelines that will be produced by the Physical Planning Section ("PPS") of the Lands and Surveys Department in the Ministry of Natural Resources.

The purpose of last night's meeting was to give the Placencia Peninsula community an overview of the project and existing procedures/policies -- and to allow residents to give PPS input into the new regulations and guidelines that will be adopted to govern construction of these types of projects. Ms. Carren Williams from PPS presided at the meeting.

Following are notes from the meeting for those of you who couldn't attend.

Overview of Program:

PPS is currently documenting all existing piers and other coastal installations such as seawalls (see above for more extensive list of types of projects being documented).

When the documentation is completed, PPS will discuss with local authorities measures to "regularize" coastal structures that did not get the proper construction permits. "Regularizing" these structures apparently means (in most cases) working with the owner to bring them up to "code" per the new guidelines.

After documentation, PPS will also develop plans, procedures and review guidelines for new applications for coastal construction projects, plus a more vigorous monitoring program.

Local input, both from residents and government bodies such as Village Councils, is a part of both post-documentation processes, hence last night's meeting.

In the Placencia Peninsula area, the new guidelines will focus on the Peninsula, as well as the cayes, specifically including Laughing Bird Caye and Gladden Spit, as the primary local protected areas.

Current Permitting Procedures:

- Filing of application for a permit including (i) a copy of the land title for the property on which the construction will be located; (ii) a professional drawing of the proposed construction; (iii) the Environmental Compliance Plan (ECP) from the Department of the Environment (DOE), if applicable; (iv) information on other similar construction in the same geographic area; (v) description of materials to be used in the construction; and (vi) recommendation/approval of village council if project is within a village.
- Site inspection by PPS
- Possible consultation with DOE, the Geology and Petroleum Department, Coastal Zone and other agencies as deemed necessary
- Approval or denial of permit

Comments from Audience on Issues to be Addressed in New Permitting and Enforcement Processes

- Enforcement and fines are primary problems in the Placencia area.
 - Fines are so low that developers see payment of fines as merely a cost of doing business, to be paid after they've already done with they wanted to do, notwithstanding legal requirements. Residents urged PPS to substantially increase fines for illegal coastal constructions.
 - Lack of any local enforcement ability means that projects are often completed before anyone from the national government can get to Placencia to stop illegal projects. The recent illegal clear cutting of mangroves in the Village was cited as an example. According to two local residents who had personal knowledge of this situation, mangroves were cut by hand and bulldozed last week. Placencia Village Council members ordered the mangrove destruction to stop, but since they had no legal authority to actually stop the mangrove clearing, they were ignored. Forestry was contacted immediately, but it took a week for a Forestry agent to visit Placencia, and by that time, the mangroves were gone.

Residents forcefully urged PPS to come up with some mechanism for local enforcement. Requiring publication of applications for permits was suggested as a way to inform local residents of who has legally applied for a permit and who has not. Developers should be required to pay for the publication in the Amandala and the Reporter.

Lack of financial/personnel resources were given as the reason for poor national enforcement.

- Local community desires for development restrictions are ignored by national government.

Ms. Williams strongly urged Placencia Peninsula communities to draw up a master plan for community development, including zoning. She stated that while the guidelines would have no legal force or effect, they would be given great weight by PPS when reviewing applications for coastal construction. She also informed the audience that PPS could provide technical assistance to develop these guidelines and zoning.

Brian Yearwood stated that the Placencia Village Council has informed PPS and other agencies in writing that no docks should be approved on the Sea coast within the Placencia Village proper (generally from the dock north to the Chabil Mar area).

Ms. Williams also confirmed that while all docks are now legally public and public access cannot be denied. However, she also mentioned that strong support to allow docks to be private is emerging in some areas.

Guidelines: A draft of proposed new guidelines will be available in May and another public meeting will be held to discuss them. PPS will notify local residents about the meeting through radio, cable and email. The draft guidelines will also be made available to the community before the meeting.