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Ritz Carlton Project to Mitigate Beach Erosion and Sargassum Buildup Approved by CZM

Coastal Zone Management Committee greenlights geo tubes and sargassum barriers aimed at preserving the beach and reducing cleanup costs

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Janeke Simon **September 19, 2024**

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The Ritz Carlton in St. Thomas, USVI

A project at the Ritz Carlton to mitigate twin issues of sand erosion and sargassum piling up on the beach in front of the property has been greenlit by the Coastal Zone Management Committee.

On Tuesday, Amy Dempsey, one of those presenting on behalf of Ritz Carlton, said that “we’re trying to preserve the beach at Ritz Carlton ever since the 2017 hurricanes,” and told commissioners that the project under discussion was just part of those efforts. “On top of that,

we've also got the issue of these massive amounts of sargassum coming in and impacting our beaches," Ms. Dempsey continued, noting that sargassum removal efforts can also result in the loss of beach sand.

In response, the Ritz Carlton has been testing the deployment of sargassum barriers, recently settling on the most suitable offshore location. Additionally, devices called "geo tubes" have also been utilized along the shoreline. "Their intent is to act as speedbumps, basically," said Ms. Dempsey, trapping sand on shore and preventing storms from further eroding the beach.

She assured commissioners that the geo tubes would not overly impinge on the enjoyment of the beach by humans, or access to the shore by marine life. The 11 tubes would be spaced 15 feet apart from each other, and will only rise three feet from the bottom, giving ample clearance for movement over and between the objects. The tubes are removable, Ms. Dempsey noted, making them easily replaceable if their performance does not meet expectations.?

The sargassum barriers, Ms. Dempsey assured commissioners, were equally as important, making cleanup easier and more efficient than trying to remove the problematic seaweed after it piles up along the shoreline. "We have got to, as a territory, continue working towards finding a good solution for this, because this is going to keep on coming and keep on coming," Ms. Dempsey said, stressing the potential for sargassum to become a resource for the territory instead of remaining a liability.

Cara Golding, general manager of the Ritz Carlton Club on St. Thomas, said that since the installation of the sargassum barrier, cleanup costs relating to seaweed disposal had fallen by about \$600,000 per year. "It has made my landscaping team very happy...it's a lot less work for those gentlemen who work extremely hard," she noted.

?Responding to questions from CZM commissioners, Ms. Golding noted that the sargassum barriers are not deployed year-round. "We try to place them in the water at the end of April, early May," she said, "and then we try to take it out by October. That's the goal, hoping that the Sargassum season is kind of over with by then." Manual removal efforts on the beachfront begin at 6 a.m., and during heavy influxes the resort might need two shifts over 12 hours to clear all the sargassum that comes to shore. "We've had days where we've had 17 dumpsters full of sargassum that have been removed from the beach," she disclosed.

After more discussion about the regional response to the sargassum influx and various solutions that were being explored to extract value from the hitherto unwanted seaweed, the St. Thomas CZM Committee voted to approve the Ritz Carlton Club's application for a permit to install the geo tubes and sargassum containment booms for beach protection.