Various aspects of beach management

By Chris O’Shea Roper and Tom Linton
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This past Saturday, the front page story in The Daily News hit close to home: “Park board to discontinue voluntary seaweed maintenance” (The Daily News, June 16).

The story said, effective in one week, crews of the Galveston Park Board of Trustees will discontinue voluntary seaweed maintenance on the West End.

With this change in beach management, the discussion is shifting from the controversy over the Severance decision to a focus on the future. “Severance decision” refers to the Severance v. Patterson ruling redefining private versus public beach property in the Texas.

It seems that we are finally beginning to look forward instead of arguing about the past. We now hear questions such as “How will activities on and around the beaches of Texas be affected in the long run?” or “What changes will be required to our constitutional or statutory laws going forward?”

The pressing question for the immediate future is, “How do we manage and maintain the beach in this new environment?”

And of even greater importance, “How will our decisions today impact our coastal ecosystem and economy?”

Management of Texas beaches in the future will require a paradigm shift — an approach sometimes described as looking at the train wreck from the other side of the tracks.

If you live, work or play along the Texas coast, the Severance decision will impact you.

So, today we are beginning a series of columns to look at the different aspects of beach
management (cleaning, replenishment, beach access, law enforcement, health, safety, etc.) that have been, and will continue, to be affected by the decision.

We hope this series will provide visibility on how different communities are addressing the specific impacts of the Severance case on their beaches.

Some of the articles will look at how other coastal states in the U.S. manage their beaches without an Open Beaches Act.

We also plan to document how the residents and the elected officials of the state go about creating this new paradigm for future beach management in Texas.

While legislative remedies are being discussed, primarily in Austin, they will need to be influenced by those who will be most directly affected, we coastal residents.

The Open Beaches Act now is part of our Texas Constitution. It is important that we make informed decisions that can be implemented effectively.

In the next column, we will begin to look at specific beach management issues and a super-sized example of the “paradigm shift” that occurred right here in Galveston.

The Severance v. Patterson decision raises many questions about beach ownership. Chris O’Shea Roper, of Bayou Vista, is a Texas certified Master Naturalist with a specialization in water quality and marsh restoration, and Tom Linton teaches at Texas A&M University at Galveston, are writing a series of columns about the ruling and its implications.