TOWN OF SOUTH BETHANY
TOWN COUNCIL & RESILIENCY COMMITTEE JOINT WORKSHOP MINUTES
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2026
9:30 a.m.

Meeting Called to Order

Mayor Dondero called the October 28, 2026, Town Council & Resiliency Committee Joint Workshop to order at 9:31 a.m.

Attendance and Absences

In attendance were Mayor Edie Dondero and Councilmembers Steve Gallagher, Mark Giler, Chris Keefe, Sarah Long, Bob Shields, and Cindy Van Horn; Resiliency Committee members Larry Budd, Arthur Burritt, Colin Chasler, Catherine Hughes, Gerald Injaian, and Joan Marini; Town Manager Maureen Hartman, Town Code Enforcement Officer Joe Hinks, and Town Clerk Matt Amerling. Resiliency Committee member Michael Powell was absent. Public attendees: 3.

Presentation by Gina Tonn, PhD, PE, CFM, Principal and Senior Consultant of Verdantas, regarding the results and recommendations of the Bulkhead Height Evaluation study

Gina Tonn of Verdantas presented and discussed the results of a coastal analysis of potential future bulkhead elevations in South Bethany. Ms. Tonn explained that the study aims to determine if homeowners can raise bulkheads without impacting the floodplain, while ensuring compliance with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) regulations and the town's floodplain ordinance. The presentation covered the study's progress, including data collection, existing conditions assessment, and modeling using FEMA's floodplain models. The final report is still in progress, and a separate public meeting will be scheduled to present the findings to residents.

Ms. Tonn explained that current Code requires bulkheads to align with existing structures where practical, but no specific height requirements are specified. Verdantas reviewed other community's codes, which showed varying approaches to bulkhead height restrictions, and examined current bulkhead heights in South Bethany, which range from 1.5 to 4 feet (NAVD88). Ms. Tonn also shared tidal information from the USGS Jefferson Creek tide gauge, including current water levels and historical data from 1996 through September 2026. Ms. Tonn presented sea level rise projections from the 2025 climate change report by the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (DNREC), focusing on intermediate and intermediate-high scenarios. The report shows that approximately one-half foot of sea level rise occurred between 2000 and 2025, and projections show an expected total of 1.98 feet of rise by 2050 and 2.59 feet by 2075 under the intermediate-high scenario. She presented graphs illustrating how higher high tides in 2075 would regularly exceed levels seen during recent nor'easters and Hurricane Sandy, and discussed calculations of annual tidal flooding hours that show increasing time periods where tides will exceed current bulkhead elevations. Ms. Tonn further explained that the projections are based on climate change models from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and DNREC, with the intermediate-high scenario chosen as a cautious middle ground, while noting that past DNREC projections have generally tracked at the intermediate level.

Ms. Tonn reviewed existing bulkhead heights across different areas of the Town, showing current height ranges from 1.5 to 4 feet, with significant variations between regions. She then presented three potential future bulkhead scenarios for South Bethany. Ms. Tonn explained that the proposed heights were selected based on the need to prevent regular flooding with consideration to the practical challenges of requiring homeowners to raise their bulkheads significantly.

Ms. Tonn then presented to Council and the committee members some of the implications of raising bulkheads, including potential impacts on property grades, drainage systems, roads, and utilities. She explained that raised bulkheads might be higher than yards, houses, or roads, and discussed concerns about water pressure, engineering requirements, and drainage implications. Ms. Tonn also addressed homeowner considerations regarding filling behind bulkheads and water access, noting that consulting with a bulkhead contractor would be needed to address seepage concerns and determine if viable options exist for not filling behind bulkheads.

Ms. Tonn clarified that the Verdantas study aims to determine compliant bulkhead heights that meet FEMA requirements; how the Town should handle these through Code and regulations still will need to be determined. Drainage implications were identified as a critical concern, though the study will not quantify specific drainage impacts to roadways, leaving that for the Town to address through permitting processes. Ms. Tonn presented a technical overview of FEMA floodplain modeling, explaining that almost the entire town is mapped within FEMA's special flood hazard area.

Ms. Tonn reviewed modeling results showing no increase in flood heights for the three proposed scenarios and, therefore, no impact to existing FEMA flood maps. While there may not be a formal FEMA submission required, the group agreed that the floodplain manager should consult FEMA to ensure compliance with the National Floodplain Insurance Program. The discussion then moved to evaluating the scenarios based on decision factors including residual flood risk, property impacts, drainage and infrastructure impacts, and permitting challenges.

Council and committee members discussed the challenges of implementing consistent bulkhead heights across the community, as well as the advantages and practicality of coordinated replacements.

Public Comment

Dave Wilson, 419 Rebecca Road, asked if Verdantas looked into what coastal towns in New York and New Jersey did with their bulkheads after Hurricane Sandy to put into this presentation. Ms. Tonn stated, yes, Verdantas did some research into what was happening in other coastal towns in the mid-Atlantic but, surprisingly, there wasn't much on record when it came to bulkheads.

Susan Werner, 216 Carlisle Drive, stated concerns about property deed issues, where some homeowners don't actually own their bulkheads, which could complicate any future mandates for replacement or height increases.

Adjournment

Motion by Mayor Dondero, seconded by Councilwoman Cindy Van Horn to adjourn the October 28, 2026, Town Council & Resiliency Committee Workshop meeting at 11:35 a.m. Motion carried 7-0.

Respectfully submitted,

Council Secretary

Town Clerk

11/13/2026
Date of Approval