

Eased CRZ may see development boom on coastline

TNN | Oct 17, 2014, 11.23 PM IST

MUMBAI: The stringent coastal regulation zone (CRZ) rules supposed to protect the coastline from rampant construction could become virtually irrelevant in Mumbai after the high court upheld the tweaked norms.

With construction allowed within just 100m of a bay -- it was restricted to 500m -- Mumbai's developers now have a carte blanche to build much taller buildings. Nothing now stops large parts of the city from being redefined as lying by a bay and this will open up almost the entire Mumbai coastline to unplanned construction, say experts.

The Bombay high court recently upheld a builder's plea that its plot falls near the Mahim Bay (as opposed to the sea) and allowed it to apply for permissions for construction 100m from the coastline. In 2011, the Jairam Ramesh-led environment ministry reduced the 500m minimum distance from the high tide line of a seafront required for construction to just 100m if it was a bay.

Many city builders with coastal plots have since rushed to the National Hydrographic Institute in Dehradun and the Institute of Remote Sensing in Chennai. They have certified areas such as Backbay -- from Nariman Point and Cuffe Parade to Girgaum Chowpatty -- and Mahim as bays and marked out builders' plots as being outside the 100m zone.

Not only will more land be opened up for construction in and near the island city, builders will be able to use much higher floor space index (FSI) only 100m from a bay. "Supply will increase and rates are bound to be stable or may reduce in certain weaker locations," said a leading developer.

A senior official of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), which prepares and executes the city's development plan,

said the repercussions of freeing 400m from bay areas will have to be studied. “Can the city handle so much development?” he wondered.

Urban planning consultant Vidyadhar Phatak said CRZ norms have already been diluted for redevelopment of slums and dilapidated cess buildings. “In Mumbai, it will not make much of a difference because most areas falling under CRZ II are already developed. But, yes, developers will benefit from this 400m reduction,” he said.

“CRZ is meant to tackle issues like sea level changes and flash floods in coastal areas. The moment you allow construction, these areas become susceptible and vulnerable,” pointed out Prasad Shetty, secretary of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region’s environment improvement society. “The state should ask the Supreme Court for its interpretation,” he added.

Architect and housing activist P K Das said the HC order will be a precedent to relax CRZ in Mumbai. “Technically, the entire city is a bay. However, the objective of CRZ is to restrict further densification of coastal areas and check the pressure on coastal ecology and environment. This order contradicts and undermines the basic idea of CRZ,” said Das.

Any relaxation will have a cascading impact on the entire city, he added. “More construction does not address or help Mumbai’s housing and development woes. It will worsen Mumbai’s case and its quality of life.”