

EH Star Letter to the Editor: Published on April, 2, 2015

Dear David,

Helen Rattray's recent "Connections" column articulates a frustration faced by coastal communities across the nation. Having once allowed private development of the shoreline, why can't we simply relocate those developments in the face of rising sea levels, more frequent storms and retreating beaches?

Unfortunately, complex environmental issues are not subject to "silver bullet" solutions. Key environmental and planning successes in our region – the Pine Barrens Act, the Community Preservation Fund, Suffolk County Drinking Water Protection Program, the Bridgehampton and Sagaponack Erosion Control District, to name a few – have succeeded precisely because they did not gloss over the true complexity of the issues or strongly held positions of the affected parties. Only then could advocates and local leaders help build broad community support for new legislation and create the dedicated funding streams that make these programs possible.

The current litigation filed by coastal advocates points to legitimate concerns about the long-term impacts even of so-called "temporary" shoreline stabilization projects. Those seeking to protect our beaches rely on a variety of strategies to prevent the installation of permanent bulkheads, seawalls and revetments which, once in place, are nearly impossible to get removed. Simultaneously we are building the case for stronger and more effective redevelopment rules. Litigation is only one strategy for creating real world solutions to coastal development conflicts.

Instead of pitting one environmental group against another, Mrs. Rattray would have done well to point out that the principal reason the current debate in Montauk is over sandbags – not a stone revetment or hard-core manufactured dune, as the Army Corps originally proposed – is because Concerned Citizens of Montauk, Group for the East End, and other conservationists worked for years to oppose such measures. To suggest that our organizations have not been heard from is simply a suspension of reality. In fact, thanks to the efforts of the CCOM, the town now has \$250,000 of New York State grant money to create the framework for a coastal plan that includes retreat.

That said, substantial concerns remain regarding the design of the Army Corps' stabilization plan. Group for the East End and CCOM have called upon the Town to take lead in assessing the project, getting independent technical review and assuring that future decisions about the project rest with local officials and not the individual landowners. Should the Corps' interim sandbag proposal move forward, there is a substantially improved chance the community can finally begin the larger task of adaptation and resiliency planning, instead of battling indefinitely over a flood of individual applications for stone walls and steel bulkheads.

In her closing, Mrs. Rattray makes easy reference to the need for relocating Montauk's vulnerable motels, as if such a measure could ever happen without the active engagement of those property owners.

If the Town refuses outside storm protection funding, the motel owners have no reason to ever come to the table and every reason to file applications for private seawalls. The history of such applications in Suffolk County tells us that a judge will eventually award permission and the walls will never come out. Given all of the facts and circumstances, Group for the East End and CCOM believe the eventual goal of retreat is best accomplished by having a publicly owned erosion-control easement that places the future of any erosion-control structure in public hands and provides that any structure can be removed when the community is ready, and a viable mechanism to allow for the relocation of the hotels is in place. Saying we should move the motels is one thing, actually figuring out how to achieve that goal requires much more than rhetoric.

Clearly there is plenty to unpack for anyone legitimately trying to figure out the best way to protect our beaches. Given the consequences, passions about this issue run high. As a result, it would be extremely helpful for all those who feel compelled to weigh in, to recognize that workable solutions involve a lot more than any one approach can ever offer.

Sincerely,

Jeremy Samuelson, Executive Director, Concerned Citizens of Montauk  
Robert S. DeLuca, President, Group for the East End