

In Time For a Busy Summer

Laura Tooman takes reins of active C.C.O.M.

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As residents and elected officials ponder the Town of East Hampton's present, in which some waterways are compromised and closed to the harvesting of shellfish, and a future amid projections of sea level rise, more storms of greater intensity, and resulting erosion, Concerned Citizens of Montauk, an environmental advocate for the easternmost hamlet, is poised to protect its natural resources as it has for almost 50 years.

Laura Tooman assumed the presidency of the group on May 1, just as the town embarked on a monumental effort to protect groundwater, a coastal assessment resiliency plan is developed, hamlet studies proceed, and the summer visitors arrive.

Ms. Tooman comes prepared. For the last six years, she served as executive assistant to Assemblyman Fred W. Thiele Jr. Previously, she worked for the State Department of Environmental Conservation and the Peconic Estuary Program. She holds a master's degree in environmental policy.

Mr. Thiele, she said, "is a champion for the environment, and that's one of the things that attracted me toward him — he was so passionate, he really did care, and he did so many great things." Hands-on work to allow up to 20 percent of the community preservation fund to be appropriated for water initiatives, which voters resoundingly approved in November, was among her accomplishments with Mr. Thiele, she said. "It was an amazing experience."

But C.C.O.M. "had, over the last couple of years, grown into a very well respected organization," she said. "It seemed like a really good fit, what the organization had grown to and where they want to go. It fits very well with my strengths, and with wanting to take the helm and see what we could do."

Ms. Tooman "presents a unique blend of environmental policy, community organizing, and strategic thinking that will serve both C.C.O.M. and the Montauk community very well," said Jeremy Samuelson, her immediate predecessor. Between the water-quality improvement effort, coastal resiliency planning, and the hamlet studies that will produce a roadmap for the town's future, "it takes a very experienced hand to navigate all those simultaneously, and keep an eye on the planning and zoning applications that are coming in," said Mr. Samuelson, who is now director of the Nature Conservancy's Mashomack Preserve on Shelter Island. "Laura is in for a very busy summer, but she is also the right person to handle this very diverse position."

Concerned Citizens of Montauk and Mr. Thiele's office had worked closely on Army Corps of Engineers projects, including the controversial downtown beach replenishment effort. "The Army Corps has had to come back multiple times since the project was finished, simply because Mother Nature has a different path for us," she said of the 2016 placement of a 3,100-foot-long sandbag seawall. "That indicates to us that what was done was not sufficient."

C.C.O.M., she said, supports sand-only replenishment, opposing additional sandbags or revetments. "That's why we're working with the Army Corps and Congressman Lee Zeldin right now." She hoped that the Fire Island to Montauk Point shoreline project, or FIMP, which has not been finalized, would provide for as many as 700,000 cubic yards of sand every four years. "We're not sure what we will see for downtown," she said, "but we are pushing sand-only projects."

What FIMP ultimately delivers may not be enough, Ms. Tooman said. "At least in Montauk, we need to start thinking about a longer-term solution," be it a retreat from the ocean, continued beach renourishment, or both. "I think we're going to see a longer-term strategy identified when that coastal assessment resiliency plan is done."

Ms. Tooman, who lives in Sag Harbor with her husband, Damien, and their daughter, Rylee, who is 3 months old, said that along with C.C.O.M.'s outreach to the town and state and federal agencies, getting individuals involved is key to water-quality improvement. C.C.O.M.'s Save the Lake, Save the Pond initiative is a program aimed at reducing nitrogen loading in Lake Montauk and Fort Pond. Those taking part receive an assessment of better practices on their property, such as septic system inspection, repair, or upgrade; ways to slow, store, and filter stormwater, and toxin-free landscaping.

"There's only so much we can do on our own," Ms. Tooman said. "It's private property owners who really need to do their part, too."

Residential and commercial property owners alike have been encouraged to participate. Concerned Citizens of Montauk will hold a cocktail party at Gosman's restaurant on June 16 from 5 to 7 p.m., serving as both a member appreciation party and an invitation to new participants.

"We're hoping to get 100 people signed up for the program," Ms. Tooman said. "That is a really good thing that people should contact us about if they're interested. We'd be happy to set up a site visit and go from there."

C.C.O.M., she said, will help the hamlet's residents take advantage of incentives to replace aging septic systems and those in environmentally sensitive areas once the town finalizes a plan and incorporates the up-to 20 percent of C.P.F. money allocated to water quality. The town board will hold a public hearing on proposed legislation allowing up to \$15,000 in subsidies to replace such systems on June 15.

Town officials, Ms. Tooman said, "clearly recognize that it's important. I don't think the program is going to be perfect, but no one's ever done it. It's going to be a learning process. I think it's going to be a great program townwide, but in Montauk especially — there are many of us who can't even afford maintenance on our system, let alone a new system that is going to reduce the nitrogen that we're putting in the water."

Decades after its formation in 1970 to prevent the construction of 1,400 houses near Big Reed Pond, the mission of Concerned Citizens of Montauk continues. As the hamlet absorbs ever more visitors, sustainable practices and the preservation of its natural beauty become both more important and more challenging.

"People want to be here because it's beautiful," Ms. Tooman said, "but we need to make sure when people come out here and build or redo their home, they're doing it in a sustainable manner that is not going to impact the environment or our groundwater."