

Tensions Swelling as Beach Erodes



Gordon M. Grant for The New York Times

A large rock sea wall was installed in front of the Montauk Shores Condominium complex on the eastern edge of Ditch Plains beach in Montauk, N.Y.

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Published: June 27, 2013

MONTAUK, N.Y. — Perched at the edge of the Atlantic with cliff neighbors including Paul Simon and Dick Cavett, Montauk Shores shares a distinction with Bohemia Cove in Malibu — it is one of the most desirable trailer parks in the United States. Its stationary mobile homes have water views that are no less sweeping than those of Andy Warhol's former estate, Eothen, just a few miles to the east.



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Clay hardpan sticks out from the sand, which some attribute to erosion from major storms.

The cost of that view is vulnerability. Hurricane Sandy breached the rocky dune barrier that had protected the park for years. So its managers built a mighty, new and bigger sea wall of large rocks that promises to fend off the next such super storm.

But as is often the case along the fragile shore, what's good for one community may have unintended effects elsewhere. The wall is being identified as a possible culprit in the drastic erosion of sand at Ditch Plains, just to the west, a beach so renowned for its cliffs and surf that fashion and magazine photo shoots take place there with increasing regularity; an apparel company is even seeking to trademark its name.

And so the trailer park — where mobile homes are sold as condominiums, priced as high as \$650,000 — and its sea wall have found themselves at the center of a man-versus-nature dispute in this exposed Long Island hamlet on the ocean.

The deterioration of Ditch Plains's beach and its possible causes have strained the cooperative abilities of the five-member board of the Town of East Hampton, which includes Montauk; partisan fault lines there already rival those of Washington (they are just more personal).

It is only now, on the eve of the Fourth of July holiday week, that the town is moving forward with a temporary solution, spending approximately \$85,000 to dump more than 4,000 cubic yards of sand on the beach. The town fully knows that much of the sand may eventually be washed away.

William J. Wilkinson, the town supervisor of East Hampton, called it “temporary relief to try to see if we can even have a beach this summer at Ditch.”

The idea that a barrier at the trailer park could have a negative effect at Ditch Plains was not new.

East Hampton's own water revitalization plan of 1999 — which serves as a binding code — concluded that the trailer park's existing protective rocks “may influence erosion at Ditch Plains” and that more extensive work there could “aggravate this situation.”

After the storm, East Hampton officials did grant the park a permit to restore its dune “with sand and relocation of existing rocks,” \$2,000 worth of work all told.

But the park trucked in large new rocks, building the wall so it appears to jut farther into the sea — covering a narrow beach that was once exposed at low tide — and higher into the air.

Through the spring, the storm-ravaged beach at Ditch Plains stood like an open wound at the heart of the hamlet; once vast and sandy, it was worn down to dark and ugly hardpan — and at high tide parts disappeared entirely.

Ditch Plains often suffers some erosion in the off-season from hurricanes and winter nor'easters; it is usually restored naturally by summer.

But that did not happen this year.

As Memorial Day approached and the town had to close the beach to bathing, tensions rose, and the search for reasons began.

The major environmental group here, Concerned Citizens of Montauk — which often finds itself at odds with Mr. Wilkinson, a Republican and former Disney executive — identified one thing that existed near Ditch Plains now that did not exist before: the newly rebuilt sea wall at the trailer park.

The group's executive director, Jeremy Samuelson, blamed the wall in a tense exchange with Mr. Wilkinson at a public meeting in May.

Mr. Samuelson cried out, in a mostly empty meeting room during a board discussion of the beach, that the rebuilding of the sea wall had devastated Ditch Plains.

Mr. Wilkinson declared that, as far as he was concerned, the hurricane had been strong enough to cause such lasting damage and that the trailer park sea wall “had nothing to do with the scouring at that beach.” (This exchange ended in an accusation by Mr. Samuelson that Mr. Wilkinson was in the pocket of major landowners and Mr. Wilkinson's dismissal of the accusations as “snotty” commentary from “Mr. Lobbyist.”)

There was a bigger issue underlying the back-and-forth: How far should government go in allowing landowners to protect their beachfront properties, given that many solutions, like building hard beach barricades, can in some cases cause worse erosion nearby?

Mr. Wilkinson is on the record generally supporting the idea of a hardened sea wall that would protect all of Montauk's beaches and its vital downtown hotel area, even though the town coastal plan effectively bans them.

Mr. Samuelson argues that “hard structures beget hard structures.” He has indicated he will fight any such move.

That larger issue could be forced in the next year, when the Army Corps of Engineers is expected to release a plan for protecting the area along with the full federal financing that would pay for it. So-called rock revetments could be part of it.

In an interview at his offices in the wood-shingled East Hampton Town Hall, Mr. Wilkinson accused environmentalists of dishonestly blaming the trailer park for problems at Ditch Plains to serve a knee-jerk, longer-term goal of blocking any moves by the Army Corps or others to build hard beach-protective structures.

“There's intentional fibbing going on,” Mr. Wilkinson said.

Interviews with several coastal specialists found a range of opinions on how much the wall might have affected Ditch Plains.

Mr. Samuelson has said the town should, at the very least, hire a coastal expert who can study it more closely and provide a scientific basis for this kind of debate — and to help it review whatever the Army Corps proposes.

“Our response to Hurricane Sandy cannot be to build an 885-foot sea wall without consulting an engineer,” Mr. Samuelson said. “That is the surest way to ensure we are a beach town with no beach.”

The board’s two Democrats, Sylvia Overby and Peter Von Scoyoc, and Dominick J. Stanzione, a Republican, made a move to enlist a coastal expert during a working session in the spring.

But Mr. Wilkinson, a Republican, and his steadfast party ally, Deputy Supervisor Theresa K. Quigley, were absent.

Mr. Wilkinson said he feared the town would chase away the Army Corps with its own coastal expert. And, during a later, contentious meeting of the full board, he and Ms. Quigley forced a reversal of that move in favor of a local consulting engineer. (Ms. Quigley angrily accused her Democratic rivals of trying to sneak it in when she was visiting her daughter in the hospital.)

As Memorial Day came and went with no resolution — and no lifeguard at the beach — pleas for help from local business leaders and residents grew louder. “Montauk Residents Demand That Ditch Plains Beach Be Replenished!” read a full-page newspaper ad that a group called Montauk Citizens Voice took out in early June.

But Mr. Wilkinson then appeared to have found a way to stop the argument: he said he could provide new sand only if he could pay for it with money specifically earmarked for damage caused by the hurricane, and only the hurricane.

With that, the opponents stood down, for the time being, as the town began trucking in the sand this week and lifeguards reappeared.

Still, the town filed charges that Montauk Shores had violated its permit last week. On Thursday, officials at the State Department of Environmental Conservation said they had determined that the sea wall was “significantly wider and higher than authorized,” and filed charges as well.

Speaking at an arraignment on the local charges last week, a lawyer for the trailer park, Richard E. Whalen, said that the rocks had been installed properly and that the charges were “politically motivated.”

A version of this article appeared in print on June 28, 2013, on page A23 of the New York edition with the headline: Tensions Swelling As Beach Erodes.