

Coastal Experts Offer Input On Protecting Montauk's Beaches, Downtown

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As East Hampton Town faces a monumental decision on how best to protect Montauk's beaches and low-lying downtown from future storms before federal funding disappears, two coastal experts have suggested a broader scope—extending the range of beach nourishment and avoiding hard structures.

A standing-room only crowd flooded the Montauk firehouse on Saturday afternoon to hear a perspective outside of five options—including sand nourishment and a buried seawall—proposed by the U.S. Army

Corps of Engineers. That agency is analyzing the options to determine costs and make recommendations to the town early next month, so East Hampton can take advantage of full federal funding before the money available for the project goes elsewhere.

But the Concerned Citizens of Montauk, or CCOM, invited Dr. Orrin H. Pilky, a professor emeritus of earth and ocean sciences at Duke University and a marine and coastal geologist specializing in the study of ocean beaches and coastal policy, and Dr. Stephen P. Leatherman, a professor and director of the laboratory for coastal research at Florida International University, to offer their insight at the meeting, named, "Beaches or Boulders: Montauk's Future Shoreline."

Jeremy Samuelson, the executive director of CCOM, opened the discussion by stating a gross need by the public for more information on a decision so weighty it will affect the hamlet's shoreline for decades to come. The Fire Island to Montauk Point Reformulation Study, or FIMPS, a plan to rebuild beaches and provide other protections for communities along the entire south shore of Long Island, has been in the works for 40-some years, he said, and all the Army Corps has to show for it so far is a set of five slides shown at Town Hall with no narrative, budget or maintenance routine provided, but a warning that the town must pick an option in a matter of weeks. Saturday's meeting, therefore, was intended to be a starting point for conversation.

Dr. Leatherman, who is popularly known as "Dr. Beach" for his annual beach ratings, named two coastal hazards on Long Island's south shore: storms, such as nor'easters and hurricanes, and rising sea levels. He called Montauk's opportunity to use a lot of Army Corps money "golden," but cautioned about being pushed too quickly into making a bad decision. He questioned why just a relatively small stretch of beach is being singled out for attention and why the nourishment wasn't being extended all the way out to Ditch Plains, which could eventually feed neighboring beaches.

Dr. Leatherman said he supports maximizing the amount of sand placed on the beaches to make them as wide as possible, but advised against hard structures. When the beaches erode, a buried seawall will become exposed, and such structures will be stuck there, he said. They never get removed. By that point, he said, the Army Corps will have moved on and Montauk will no longer be a priority, as it is now, because of the destruction from Superstorm Sandy. To protect businesses, however, he suggested placing geotubes, or large bags pumped full of sand, under the beach. They can build up sand like a seawall, but have the advantages of not being a hard structure and have the possibility of taken out easily down the road. He also noted that beaches are like icebergs in that just a tip of sand appears above the surface, but a long foot of sand stretches underwater for dozens of feet. Piling up sand on the beach is easier, but a large-scale look at the entire beach, including the underwater part, could be helpful. Submerged breakwaters could be one option, he said.

Dr. Pilky, meanwhile, a vocal critic of the Army Corps, told the crowd how the agency must "sing for its supper," and therefore cannot be expected to be honest and competent. He criticized its role in the breaks in the levies in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, as well as groins in Westhampton that led to the erosion in what is now West Hampton Dunes.

Like Dr. Leatherman, he urged the public to avoid hard structures. He also said that the alternatives proposed by the Army Corps look like they date from the 1960s, when FIMPS started, before sea-level rise was taken as seriously as it is today.

The experts listed various examples of additional data that could be used to help determine an optimal solution in Montauk, such as the rate of erosion, photos of the broader beach system, rather than the relatively short stretch shown by the Army Corps.

Steve Kalimnios, the owner of the beachfront Royal Atlantic Beach Resort, noted how much of Saturday's meeting focused on the environment, but tourism is a big part of the equation.

"Our number one part of our economy in this community is tourism," he said. "Those four blocks directly on the ocean represent 25 to 30 percent of the entire hotel industry of Montauk."

Dr. Leatherman acknowledged his comment as a good point.

"We're not trying to do away with your hotels and motels," he said. "We're trying to rebuild the beach and keep a good beach, which, I think, in the long-term interests is the interest of the hotels, too. If you don't have a beach out there, I'm going to tell you right now, people are not going to pay the high rates they have to pay for the beach during the season."