

All Eyes On Montauk Beach Reconstruction

Experts, public weigh options as clock ticks
By Joanne Pilgrim | October 10, 2013 - 2:28pm



At a Concerned Citizens of Montauk event on Saturday, Jeremy Samuelson, the group's director, right, moderated a discussion of beach reconstruction options for Montauk with Stephen Leatherman, left, and Orrin Pilkey, two coastal experts. Morgan McGivern

With beach erosion in Montauk now designated an emergency and the Army Corps of Engineers ready and willing to begin beach reconstruction here — and foot the bill for it — the project, which could have a long-lasting and wide-ranging impact on the nature of Montauk and its ocean shore, is at the fore for both town officials and the community.

The Army Corps is evaluating alternatives for the project, which include dredging and adding sand or constructing a rock wall to be buried under the sand along the downtown Montauk beach.

The Corps is expected to issue the town a report listing the viable options, as well as a recommended course of action, by early next month. Congress has authorized \$5.3 billion for post-Hurricane Sandy rebuilding efforts, of which \$700 million could be spent on the projects in the Army Corps's so-called Fire Island to Montauk Point Reformulation project, of which Montauk is a part.

However, competition for the money from other storm-affected communities, some hit much more severely than Montauk, and a desire not to lose out on the opportunity to improve the beach at no local cost, has town officials acting under time pressure to come to a consensus on what would be acceptable.

“There is no hard and fast deadline” for a decision, said Brian Beedenbender, a district director at Representative Tim Bishop's Patchogue office, but “a long, drawn-out disagreement could imperil the funding.”

In addition, he said, if a course of action is not set by some time in December, dredging could likely not take place during a limited time window early next year, based on environmental concerns, and another hurricane season could come and go before protection for the beach and downtown Montauk is in place.

In an effort to provide information about the effects of various approaches to rebuilding the beach, Concerned

Citizens of Montauk, a nonprofit environmental group, hosted a forum on Saturday with two coastal scientists, Stephen P. Leatherman and Orrin H. Pilkey.

Both experts strongly advised against the installation of permanent hard structures such as buried rock or a seawall, which, they said, lead to eventual loss of the beach where they are placed and nearby. Their comments are reported in a separate story in today's Star.

While C.C.O.M. held its public information session to provide "the foundation for a conversation" in the community, as the organization's executive director, Jeremy Samuelson, said on Saturday, Town Supervisor Bill Wilkinson has been saying since early in the year that a hard structure is needed to protect downtown Montauk motels.

In January, Mr. Wilkinson delivered a "Montauk Beach Restoration Project" report to Congressman Tim Bishop and other officials, for submission to the Army Corps, that included a "solution" described in the report as a "no greater than 2.3-mile engineered beach" in front of "unprotected motels." A plan drawn up by Aram Terchunian of First Coastal Corporation, included in the document, entails a \$19.9 million sand replenishment between the western edge of the village and Ditch Plain, with a 4,475-foot rock-cored dune in the downtown area, with a boardwalk and promenade and nine pedestrian and vehicular access points.

The Army Corps assumed it was an official submission on the part of the town indicating the municipality's preferred option for beach protection in Montauk, Steve Couch, a representative of the Corps, said during his Sept. 26 presentation to the board. However, the entire town board had neither discussed nor authorized preparation of the report or having First Coastal draw up a seawall plan.

Asked by Rona Klopman, an Amagansett resident, at a meeting last Thursday about when the document might be made available to the public, the supervisor said, "I don't think it will be; I don't intend to."

"I had a private conversation and analysis that I gave to Tim [Bishop] and to [Assemblyman] Fred Thiele and to Senator [Kenneth] LaValle and maybe Senator [Kirsten] Gillibrand. It was my own analysis. . . ."

"As the C.F.O. of the town, as the supervisor who's in charge of relationships with certain of our electeds throughout the U.S., I find that it's a private communication," Mr. Wilkinson said. He said the document was also submitted to the Army Corps.

Earlier this week, Mr. Bishop's office readily provided a copy of the document, which it said had been used to help make the successful pitch to the Army Corps to pursue a beach restoration project in Montauk.

A cost-benefit analysis being undertaken by the Army Corps as it narrows down the feasible options for the project will, according to agency policies, focus solely on the protection offered by, and initial and long-term costs of, the various types of projects, such as installing a hard structure or rebuilding the beach with only sand. The options will be outlined, along with a recommended course of action, in the forthcoming report.

The cost-benefit analysis is not a review of the value of protecting downtown Montauk to the overall economy, Mr. Beedenbender at Mr. Bishop's office explained this week.

The January document that Mr. Wilkinson had prepared was apparently attempting to make that case. It asserts, without citation, that Montauk generated \$912 million in tourism revenue in 2012, and 37 percent of the tourism revenue in Suffolk County.

The accuracy of some of the figures cited was called into question this week. On a page headed "Economic Engine," the report depicts Gurney's Inn, the Sloppy Tuna, the Montauk Manor, and Gosman's restaurant. The report also contains letters from Paul Monte, the general manager and C.E.O. of Gurney's, and from Steve Kalimnios, an owner and vice president of the Royal Atlantic motel, which is on the downtown beach, and labels those two hotels as "sample businesses," providing figures regarding their budgets, payroll, and taxes.

At a work session in Montauk on Tuesday, Mr. Wilkinson advised caution about asking the Army Corps to consider extending the beach reconstruction project beyond the downtown area to Ditch Plain, as the Montauk Citizens Advisory Committee has recommended.

Mr. Wilkinson said that the Army Corps, in deciding which communities to include in the Fire Island to Montauk Point shore reconstruction program "initially said Montauk isn't worth it. They've come a little further," he said, but "I think to add another mile of beach to the option is just never going to happen."

At its meeting on Monday night, the Montauk citizens group passed a resolution requesting that the town board consult an independent coastal engineer for expert guidance, that the options be evaluated based on current information about the condition of the beach, and that the board look into expanding the project to Ditch Plain.

“I think part of the reason the Army Corps of Engineers focused on downtown is because that’s where the economic analysis focused,” Chris Poli, a Montauk resident, said on Tuesday, referring to the document submitted by Mr. Wilkinson earlier this year. “That has not been done for Ditch. I would encourage the board to do that.”

“If we had all the time in the world and all the money in the world, we would certainly do these things,” Councilman Dominick Stanzione said, stressing the time frame.

Instead of asking the Army Corps to expand its project, perhaps the town could piggyback on the presence of the Corps’s dredge, and itself arrange and pay for sand replenishment at Ditch, Mr. Wilkinson suggested along with Town Councilwoman Theresa Quigley and Mr. Stanzione.

Should the Army Corps base its evaluations on the existing beach conditions, rather than using information collected immediately after Hurricane Sandy, Councilwoman Sylvia Overby said, “the costs would come down,” as the downtown beach, at least, has widened. The Ditch Plain beach, she said, “is the only emergency we as a town really had to deal with, and put sand there.”

In addition, said Ed Braun, a member of C.C.O.M.’s board of directors, should a beach reconstruction project include Ditch, it might ultimately bring down costs for the downtown area of the project, as sand along the Montauk shore drifts from east to west, the two beach experts said Saturday.

Andy Harris, another Montauk resident and C.C.O.M. board member, asked the town board to describe the next steps it would take in communicating with the Army Corps, as well as the “opportunity for public participation.”

“I would tend to have . . . a conversation with Steve Couch,” said Mr. Wilkinson, referring to the Army Corps representative from the Sept. 26 presentation.

The supervisor said that day that he had planned to have a private briefing from Mr. Couch, but other board members wanted to attend, making the meeting open to the public.

“The board is concerned that I don’t act alone, or at least I’ve heard some of that,” he commented Tuesday.

“In the interim,” Mr. Stanzione said, “as much public comment as could be thoughtfully executed would be welcome.”

Mr. Monte, a member of the American Shore and Beach Preservation Association, said the group was holding its annual conference later this month, and suggested that Mr. Wilkinson, or another town official, attend.