

Two Experts Urge Against Armoring

By Joanne Pilgrim | October 10, 2013 - 12:55pm

Two coastal experts speaking on Saturday at a Concerned Citizens of Montauk forum about options for rebuilding and protecting the Montauk shore unequivocally advised against placing hard structures on the beach, such as the buried seawall recently presented by the Army Corps of Engineers as one of the options for its Montauk project.

East Hampton Town officials are to receive a report within the month from the Army Corps detailing the beach reconstruction projects it considers cost-effective for Montauk, one of which would be undertaken by the agency at 100-percent federal cost once the town signs off.

A project to protect Montauk's downtown beach has been fast-tracked as an "emergency stabilization" project under the Army Corps's Fire Island to Montauk Point Reformulation study, some 50 years now in the making. However, with other communities also vying for the earmarked money, the town has been urged to quickly make a decision as to what is acceptable for its shore.

After the lengthy study period, and a cursory presentation of potential options by Steve Couch of the Army Corps on Sept. 26 at Town Hall, Jeremy Samuelson, the executive director of C.C.O.M., called the push to make such a weighty decision in a matter of weeks "inappropriate."

"We need a full, transparent examination of the options, including environmental and economic," he said on Saturday at the Montauk Firehouse. "I want us to get it right. I want it to be a beach town that still has a beach."

Both Orrin H. Pilkey, a marine and coastal geologist specializing in the study of ocean beaches and coastal policy, particularly in resort communities, and Stephen Leatherman, a professor and director of the Laboratory for Coastal Research at Florida International University — known as Dr. Beach for his beach ratings — said that the town should avoid armoring the ocean shore and instead rebuild and widen the beaches with sand.

"You want to absolutely avoid hard structures if you possibly can — and you possibly can right now," Mr. Pilkey said. "Nobody takes out a seawall; they just get bigger and bigger," he said, as beaches erode in front of them.

"Building seawalls only protects what's behind them; it doesn't protect the beach at all," Mr. Leatherman said. "What are we trying to protect here?" he asked. "I think the issues are somewhat confused."

"What I hear you all saying," Mr. Pilkey said, "is that the beaches are important. So the management decision should be based on the importance of the beaches. Are the buildings more important than the beaches?"

There are a "lot more options" than those so far offered by the Corps, Mr. Leatherman said, such as creating a buried "boulder train" offshore to mitigate wave action, or creating a submerged offshore breakwater. The Army Corps, he said, "seems to have a standard formula."

"We should be thinking [about] moving buildings back," Mr. Pilkey said. Though, he acknowledged, "the motel owners won't be happy about that . . . it shouldn't be your responsibility to protect their buildings. You weren't the ones who were dumb enough to build next to an eroding shoreline," he told the community members in attendance.

The scientist, author of a book called “The Corps and the Shore,” as well as “Living With Long Island’s South Shore,” was critical of the Army Corps, citing some of its projects that, he said, proved ill-advised, such as a groin at Westhampton Beach and the levees that gave way during Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Without major projects, he said, “the Corps will disappear. How could you possibly expect an agency that has to sing for its supper to be honest and competent? The Corps is dishonest and incompetent.”

Mr. Leatherman said the Army Corps should evaluate offshore topography and other data that it is not clear they are seeking in order to determine the best course of action in Montauk.

Both men also suggested that the town seek to include not just the downtown beach but a wider stretch of shoreline in the project.

“We need to consider the whole beach here as a system. Let’s nourish your whole beach, not just a little portion of it,” said Mr. Leatherman. “The Corps’s plan needs to be extended all the way to Ditch Plain.” As sand moves naturally from the east to the west along Montauk’s shore, he said, any sand deposited at Ditch “will feed downtown beaches for a decade or more to come.”

Both also discussed the inevitable impact of sea-level rise. “Like it or not, you’re going to retreat from the shoreline, one way or the other,” Mr. Pilkey said. “Which is most important — beaches or buildings?”

“You have the possibility of doing a strategic, planned withdrawal,” he said.

Instead of building a seawall to protect downtown motels, the scientists suggested that if necessary a series of geotubes — fabric bags filled with sand or a sand slurry — could be installed to protect the buildings during a storm. Then, said Mr. Leatherman, should erosion begin to reach them, “you can take them out and still have a beach” — unlike a stone wall.

“These are some of the most dynamic beaches I’ve ever seen,” he said of Montauk. “There’s sometimes a 200-foot difference between winter and summer.”

“If I was king of Montauk, I would do none of these things that we’re describing,” Mr. Pilkey said of the Corps’s options. “We need to think anew here,” he said. “Why are we looking at these really very costly and very damaging alternatives? Just because you’ve got the money is no reason to damage your beach.”

If the Corps wants only to build a seawall, said Mr. Pilkey, “maybe it’s best not to take the money.”

“I say, sand nourishment and a dune,” Mr. Leatherman said.