

THE INDEPENDENT

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Sand, Or . . . Nothing?

By Kitty Merrill



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Sand, sand, nothing but sand. That was the implied preference among experts Saturday -- use sand, not hard structures to bolster the beach -- as the Concerned Citizens of Montauk hosted an informational meeting designed to discuss erosion protection options for downtown Montauk.

According to officials from the Army Corps of Engineers, East Hampton Town is in a race to secure its share of a \$5.3 billion pie approved for post-Hurricane Sandy emergency repairs in the Northeast. Last month officials presented five conceptual options to the town board. They said a report next month will provide analysis of the options, plus a recommendation for a single solution.

To a standing room only crowd at the Montauk Firehouse, CCOM executive director Jeremy Samuelson opined that, given the work serving as an umbrella for the project, the Fire Island to Montauk Point Study, has been underway since the 1960s, asking the town to make a decision in a few short weeks is "inappropriate." He shared slides of the five options, offering brief explanations of each.

Two experts brought to Montauk by CCOM -- Doctor Stephen Leatherman and Doctor Orrin Pilkey -- were asked to weigh in on the options, as well as the Army Corps' success in providing beach protection. Pilkey is described as a "pre-eminent marine and coastal geologist specializing in the study of ocean beaches and coastal policy, particularly in resort communities."

A professor and Director of the Laboratory for Coastal Research at Florida International University, Leatherman is best known nationally as Dr. Beach, thanks to his annual list of America's Best Beaches.

Of the five options discussed by Army Corps officials in September, two of them -- a small feeder beach comprised of a comparatively minimal amount of sand placed along the shore in front of the strip of hotels in downtown Montauk, and an extensive plan calling for a series of groins built out in the water -- date back to before Hurricane Sandy. Both were previously rejected by community members and elected officials as either not enough protection or too environmentally invasive.

A third option involves moving or buying out select properties along South Emerson Avenue in order to construct a dune and replenish the beach. The fourth would mean installing a sand-covered seawall inside a dune, and the last entails using sand alone to construct a bigger beach.

Leatherman called the chance to procure full federal funding for installation of protection "a golden opportunity." But, he felt the project should be expanded, and the plan needs to "go all out" past the downtown section all the way to Ditch Plains where erosion is also a serious problem.

He "strongly advised" against building a seawall. It won't stay buried, he predicted, and once seawalls are exposed "They don't ever get pulled out." Although he made clear he doesn't support their use, Leatherman said geotubes, plastic structures that are pumped full of sand, are another option for protecting hotels along the shoreline strip. They can be installed in advance of storms, then removed.

Leatherman wondered why the Army Corps didn't consider the construction of an offshore submerged breakwater among its options. Boulders - and there are plenty of them available locally - could also be used to hold the toe of the beach.

It was noted, both last Saturday and during the September board meeting, that the Corps conceived its designs using data about beach conditions immediately after Sandy. Leatherman said more recent, and more comprehensive surveys, as well as data relating the ocean bottom contours and sand transportation should be obtained. Pilkey said it was "not at all reasonable" to proceed using just post-Sandy data. During their visit, the Corps reps asked the town to provide additional and current, information.

Samuelson introduced Pilkey as an expert in criticizing the Army Corps. Pilkey devoted a portion of his remarks to just that, characterizing the Corps, an arm of the U.S. Congress, as dishonest and incompetent. "If all engineers were like the Corps of Engineers," he said, "it would be an adventure to cross a bridge."

Speaking to the issue at hand, Pilkey agreed with Leatherman: "Absolutely avoid hard structures if you possibly can," he said. "Seawalls just get bigger and bigger." The sand atop the wall will disappear quickly, leading to more and more costly replenishment. Critiquing the slides produced by the feds, he said, they are very difficult to read, "and they're supposed to be for real people."

"If I was King of Montauk, I would do none of these things," the expert continued. Relocating hotels and businesses imperiled by rising waves "shouldn't be your responsibility," Pilkey told the assemblage. "You weren't the ones dumb enough to build on an eroding shoreline."

Leatherman said such projects are supposed to protect the public good, not just private structures. During the public participation portion of the event, however, Steve Kalimnios, owner of the Royal Atlantic Resorts hotel, reminded that tourism comprises a significant portion of the local economy and the hotels along the strip account for 25 to 30 percent of the entire industry in Montauk. "If you lose that downtown row," he said, "every business in the community is going to be affected."

Concluding his remarks Leatherman said, "You have the option to say 'Here's what we want.'"

That's not quite so.

Following the September meeting, Army Corps Public Affairs Specialist Chris Gardner said that by law the feds may only expend federal funds on a project that proves to have a positive benefit-to-cost ratio. At the town board meeting coastal planner Steve Couch said the use of sand alone was the most costly option, with an annual maintenance expense estimated at \$5 million. In an aside, he said he doubted he could garner federal approval for the sand alone plan. He called the seawall option the most economically viable.

On Saturday, Pilkey asserted, if building a seawall is the only option, "maybe you should not accept the money."

There was no opportunity for public input or questions during the September meeting. According to Gardner there will be "some level" of public comment taken during the environmental assessment of whichever plan is selected.

Bob Stern, chair of the CCOM board, opened Saturday's meeting by stating group members haven't made up their minds about the options because they didn't have enough information.

Samuelson offered one of CCOM's goals: "We want us to be a beach town that still has a beach."

