

Beach Restoration: Getting It Right In Montauk

Viewpoints Op-ed

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By Jeremy Samuelson, Executive Director, Concerned Citizens of Montauk

Downtown Montauk will not look the same in 20 years. Attempts to ensure it does are backward looking and will fail. We do not have the luxury of thinking small and so must think big. We must ask the hard question: What do we want Montauk to look like in five, 15 and 30 years?

There is still time to get it right in Montauk. But determining which large-scale beach engineering project is best for all involved requires three important changes: opening up the process, thinking bigger and bringing in expert help. A well-managed, transparent and public process based on science will yield the best solution. The idea that there is no time left to get it right is not true. Worse, it is dangerous.

After 50 years of work, the Army Corps of Engineers has presented the East Hampton community with five conceptual drawings and a warning that we quickly need to pick an option for building something on our shore to protect downtown Montauk. While there is no deadline, the Corps has advised that funding is competitive and other oceanfront areas between here and Fire Island want their share of the \$700 million allocation.

It is important that the Army Corps return to East Hampton soon with details on the construction, budget, maintenance and environmental impacts of the proposals under consideration. Of particular interest are the “geotube” and sand only options both of which avoid a stone seawall, the much narrower engineered beach that comes with it and, of course, the inevitable impacts of shore hardening. The decision about what to build on the beach in Montauk will define our community for decades to come. It is simply too important to get wrong.

The current focus of the coastal conversation – geotubes and large scale beach nourishment for Ditch Plains – were byproducts of a community-based conversation at the Montauk Firehouse on October 5th. At that event, two experts in coastal geology with long resumes and broad perspectives shared their ideas, concerns and recommendations. The conversation was wide-ranging, fact-based, open and civil. Concerned Citizens of Montauk was proud to have hosted the forum. But one forum can accomplish only so much.

Whichever option is selected for downtown Montauk – a stone seawall, geotubes, sand – or whether Ditch Plains is included as CCOM and the Montauk Citizen’s Advisory Committee have each advocated, it is important to note that Montauk’s fundamental problem will remain. Sea level is rising, Long Island is sinking, the shore is eroding and the beach continues to migrate landward. Any project only buys time to work on Montauk’s unresolved issues: septic, routine flooding, crumbling infrastructure, a LIPA substation sitting in Fort Pond and hotels atop an ever-eroding beach.

From CCOM’s view, Montauk must remain a beach town with a beach. With the exception of Culloden where the coast has already been destroyed by an ill-conceived Army Corps project, CCOM is opposed to hardening of the shoreline. The simple reason is that shore hardening almost always accelerates erosion, both at the project location and in adjoining areas.

Some have pointed to buried seawalls in East Hampton Village as benign. However, an accurate accounting reflects that many of these revetments are routinely exposed, and those that are not are flanked by Army Corps jetties. After decades of litigation, property owners who lost their beach because of the jetties threw in the towel and are now taxing themselves \$25 million to pump sand in front of their Sagaponack and Bridgehampton homes.

No seawall is without consequence, a fact recognized in East Hampton’s master coastal planning document, the Local Waterfront Revitalization Plan. This plan is due for some updates – on geotubes, for example – but remains the proper foundation for development of a comprehensive coastal management plan that allows proactive responses to the changing world around us.

East Hampton needs guidance both in working with the Army Corps and in developing a long-range plan. A well-selected, internationally regarded firm would help navigate a complex process involving multiple federal and state agencies, layers of bureaucracy and myriad decisions that are not the exclusive or primary domain of the Army Corps. We need expert help that has principal management responsibility over large-scale projects nationally and internationally. As Steven Couch from the Army Corps of Engineers remarked in his September 26th presentation at Town Hall, his agency routinely works with a number of firms in exactly this way and the process is the better for it.

Hiring experts to inform decision makers, the process and the public is far from a waste or a drag on the process. A well-managed project with broad public support will deliver the best result and withstand the test of time. CCOM believes strongly we must not simply say “yes” to something for Montauk’s beaches but instead must build a consensus around the right thing for our community.

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