

Another Chance To Get Coast Policy Right

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East Hampton Town will soon undertake an in-depth study of this region's precarious Atlantic Coast and how it can better manage risk to property and environment protection. But the real question is whether, when the work is done, it will lead to meaningful change.

It is not like these questions are new; the United States Army Corps of Engineers has been trying to figure out what to do about eastern Long Island for more than 50 years, and the town itself completed a decade-long process that led to the adoption in 1999 of a Local Waterfront Revitalization Program (although it took another seven years to be approved by state and federal agencies). But no one has ever really answered the hard questions brought forward by sea level rise, and Hurricanes Irene and Sandy only increased the sense of urgency.

It is clear that existing regulations are not adequate. Following Sandy, town officials gave highly questionable "emergency" permission for erosion-response projects, some for prohibited permanent, or "hard," structures. The looming Army Corps fortification of downtown Montauk comes right up to the line between what is permissible and what is not, and it binds the town and county to costly annual maintenance at a dollar figure that cannot accurately be anticipated, as well as unknown millions more for the project's eventual removal.

Meanwhile, private construction in danger zones continues, which will only add to the expense when the bills come in for future publicly funded rescue efforts. Though there are some bright spots, such as a planned buyout of low-lying properties on Lazy Point in Amagansett, the overriding status quo can fairly be said to show that our collective head is still buried in the sand.

Ideally, the \$500,000 study about to get under way will address the future of the coastal portions of East Hampton Town and provide clear arguments for retreat, where it is called for. We have been down this road before, however, notably when the town took over from the state after adopting its own coastal hazard policy. The rub will be if the current town board and those that follow will be able to heed the study's advice.

History suggests that nothing short of a total disaster will really change how those who live here think about our relationship with the coast, but this new initiative provides a glimmer of hope.

About the Author

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