



East Hampton Votes to Contain Beach Fires & Edgemere Parking



The East Hampton Town Board voted unanimously Aug. 6 to ban parking on the west side of South Edgemere Street near the Surf Lodge, and to require that beach fires be placed in metal containers.

Members of the community supported both initiatives at public hearings held that night. Concerned Citizens of Montauk Executive Director Jeremy Samuelson said he's seen editorials in local papers asking the town to require that beach fires be contained for the past ten years.

"This is basically a commonsense approach," he said. "After we have some fun on the beach, we should clean up our mess."

Mr. Samuelson added that, when winter storms wash away the top layer of sand, the remains of the summer's beach fires can be seen up and down the beach.

"Bill Aikin [of Montauk] was crestfallen last winter when he saw what looked like a house fire had been washed out and come back on beach," he said. "After we get our first winter storm in downtown Montauk, you see the cumulative effect of hundreds of these fires in downtown Montauk being buried."

"We quit digging holes and putting our waste in it a long time ago," he added. "Let's start doing better."

Montauk Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Laraine Creegan agreed, but she said the rule should be strengthened to require that debris from the fires must be removed from the beach, as is required in East Hampton Village.

"If people are just dumping water and leaving it, we could have hundreds of [fires' worth of] leftover debris," she said. "It really creates a problem for just the look of the sand."

She said the town could invest in metal fire-proof cans for people to dispose of the remnants of their beach fires.

Amagansett East Association President Rona Klopman agreed.

"I very much appreciate this board taking this stand," she said. "We've had no complaints from anybody and much appreciation from residents. They are very happy because they care about the beaches.... But what do I do with the logs?"

East Hampton Village Beach Manager Ed McDonald said the village instituted a requirement that fires be contained after two toddlers playing on a berm several years ago near Georgica Beach were badly burned by a beach fire from the night before that was still smoldering inside the berm.

He said the village requires that beach fires be placed in metal containers with handles, and must be removed after people leave the beach. The village also prohibits the burning of construction debris and requires people who make beach fires to keep a bucket of water nearby to extinguish them. They also do not allow fires within 50 feet of beach grass, vegetation or tents or on days when winds exceed 15 miles per hour.

"Beach fires were a wonderful thing in my childhood," he said. "But there are aesthetic and safety issues."

Since the village law was enacted, he said. "It's a whole lot better than it was."

"The beaches are cleaner and they're definitely safer," he said.

Laura Michaels of the Ditch Plains Association said her organization "wholeheartedly supports" the initiative, but she'd like to see a replacement for beach fires, perhaps gas fires using portable propane tanks.

The law will likely go into effect after this beach season is over, since it takes several weeks to be filed with New York State.

That time lag in adoption of new laws concerned emergency responders who came to speak about the parking situation on South Edgemere Street, an often-congested area near The Surf Lodge that stands between the Montauk Firehouse and downtown Montauk.

Parking was already prohibited on the east side of South Edgemere Street, and the town board voted that night to also ban parking on the west side.

Montauk Fire Commissioners Chairman Joe Dryer was very concerned.

"If we can't get our vehicles and our personnel to the scene, an ambulance can't get a person to the hospital or somebody's house is going to burn down," he said. "We can't wait 'till next year. We need an almost immediate solution to this. We need to get our vehicles and personnel through now."

Fire Department member Michael Marris said last week he'd responded to a call in which a one-year-old was having seizures. He was delayed by the traffic at The Surf Lodge on his way to the firehouse and the ambulance was delayed again trying to get to the scene.

"We are getting affected immediately," he said.

Fire Commissioner Richard Schoen suggested the town also instate “No Standing” regulations on South Edgemere Street, since many taxicabs simply stand outside The Surf Lodge, which has closed its parking lot to anyone who isn’t staying at their lodge overnight.

“That’s still a big part of the problem. I’d like you to consider that,” he said.

Fire Chief Joseph Lenahan said he believes the town should also limit parking on the side road between the Surf Lodge and the firehouse.

“There are houses on that street where sometimes people can’t get out of their driveways,” he said. “In our business, it’s all about safety.”

Town Supervisor Larry Cantwell didn’t comment on their request for immediate change, but he did thank the fire department for helping deal with the overflow crowd at a town board work session at the firehouse in mid-July.

“You guys saved us. You stepped up to the plate, brought the tables and chairs downstairs and you saved that meeting. I want you to know how grateful the town board is,” he said. “I know the community appreciated it and the town board appreciated it.”

Laura Michaels of the Ditch Plains Association said she would also like to see No U-Turn signs near The Surf Lodge, after a young man who lives in Montauk was airlifted out after he was hit by a taxicab making a U-turn on Edgemere Street. She also suggested the No Parking restrictions be seasonal so that people who live on Edgemere can have company over for Christmas.

Tom Bogdon said he’s a member of a new group called Montauk United, which had more than 300 members after it was formed last week.

“Edgemere is an accident indeed waiting to happen,” he said. “This is a problem at all hours of the day.”

Councilman Peter Van Scoyoc, the liaison to the Montauk Citizens Advisory Committee, said the CAC strongly supports both new laws, after which the board voted unanimously to pass them both.