

Montauk Sand Here, Gone Again

'Ultimately, development needs to move out of ocean's way,' Van Scoyoc says

By David E. Rattray | April 19, 2018 - 4:39pm



Higher-than-normal tides and a strong easterly sweep of surf earlier this week scoured the contours of the sand that had been placed between the ocean and the sandbags along the downtown Montauk beach. *T.E. McMorrow*

A portion of the sand placed on the downtown Montauk beach to cover sandbags exposed by a series of storms washed away over the weekend as yet another northeaster swept through the region.

East Hampton Town had authorized \$1.05 million on April 5 to pay for the work being done by Bistran Materials of East Hampton. Shortly after the contract was awarded, large dump trucks and earth-moving equipment arrived in Montauk to begin spreading sand that had been trucked in from an upland source.

Some residents and visitors expressed outrage on social media and in conversation about the new sand itself, which was an orange shade dissimilar to the familiar white sand beach that had been there before. That sand is to be covered with a layer of beach sand that is lighter in color.

The initial work lining the approximately 3,100-foot-long section of beach with massive sandbags had been paid for by the United States Army Corps of Engineers. That project, which was completed in 2016, cost \$8.4 million. According to a deal struck at the time, East Hampton Town and Suffolk County were supposed to share the cost of keeping the bags covered and the beach usable by the public. The town is in negotiations with county officials about getting reimbursed for a share of the cost of repairs in the future.

Toward the end of last week, as a forecast for yet another coastal storm became clear, East Hampton Town Highway Superintendent Stephen Lynch, who was supervising the project, suspended the work. In the days that followed, higher-than-normal tides and a strong easterly sweep of surf scoured the contours of the sand that had already been placed between the sandbags and the ocean.

The effect was not as dire as it appeared, East Hampton Town Supervisor Peter Van Scoyoc said during a meeting on Tuesday in Town Hall. "Despite claims to the contrary on Facebook that sand did not all wash

away and some of the pictures that were posted showed places where the sand had not been placed yet,” he said.

Mr. Van Scoyoc said yesterday that there had not been a determination of how much sand had been lost. He also said that he had had conversations with some of the Montauk downtown oceanfront property owners about creating a tax district to allow them to pay for sand replenishment in the future themselves. “I don’t feel that this should be an ongoing cost to taxpayers,” he said.

“I think that it is unfortunate that there are some people actually cheering for the degrading of our beach to continue. We understand that this is a stop-gap measure and that a major sand-only replenishment is the only interim step, but, ultimately, development needs to move out of the way of the ocean,” Mr. Van Scoyoc said.

A recently unveiled town planning study called for the gradual retreat from the shoreline of at-risk structures. There are about 11 separate properties along this portion of the Montauk beach, most of them motels and condominiums, with a handful of private residences. In the study, these would be removed from harm’s way and rebuilt inland in two phases. A large restored dune would be built in their place to protect the rest of the commercial area.

Sources for the money for such an ambitious project were not identified in the town study. The Army Corps has been working on and off for decades on a master plan for beaches from Fire Island to Montauk Point that is thought to be nearing completion.

The Montauk sandbags were described as a temporary measure, to hold the motels and other properties in place while the Army Corps plan was being finalized.

However, a 2016 outline of the \$1.1 billion Fire Island to Montauk Point work did not include substantial restoration of the downtown Montauk beach, a disappointment to East Hampton officials.

Work to cover the sandbags, at the Army Corps’ expense, also was done in 2017. The cost was more than \$700,000.

“What we’re witnessing now is how unsustainable, and costly, the A.C.O.E. project is,” said Laura Tooman, executive director of Concerned Citizens of Montauk. Moving forward, she said, C.C.O.M. will work to see that “we take collective steps to ensure we assess and implement a more sustainable plan for our downtown beaches.” While the hope is that the Army Corps will “deliver the sand they promised” through the Fire Island to Montauk Point study, “we may not be able to sit and wait that long,” Ms. Tooman said.

C.C.O.M. is working with the town and community to explore an erosion control district “to give us a wider beach profile and protect the short to medium-term viability of our beaches. The longer-term solution is still one which we must continue to build consensus on within the community.”

“We need to allow the natural processes of sand movement at the beach without the interruption of development,” Mr. Van Scoyoc said. “That’s what creates our beautiful beaches here and we need to take those long-term steps to maintain that. That’s not going to happen overnight. This is a difficult position to be in, and I think that the alternatives are to do nothing or do the best we can, and we’re actively pursuing doing the best we can.”

Barring any more storms, the sand work should be completed by May 15, the town said.