

A Modest Proposal: Move Montauk

By [JAY SHAH](#) · JUNE 26, 2019

Motels built on dunes overlooking the Atlantic Ocean in Montauk.

JAY SHAH / WSHU

Before Montauk became the major tourist destination it is today, it started as a small fishing village on the east end of Long Island. In 1938, a hurricane essentially turned the community into an island for several days. More than 100 homes were destroyed, the road was damaged and residents moved away.



Now, some worry history will repeat itself and the modern-day Montauk will face even more challenges.

The town started to resemble the beach destination it is today in the mid-20th century.

Developers, who wanted to capture a picturesque view of the Atlantic, built motels on top of the sand dunes right on the shore.

Environmental advocates say this created a problem.

“The dunes are natural flood protection and they are supposed to move back when sea levels rise so that the beach can continue to thrive,” says Laura Tooman, president of a local environmental advocacy group called [Concerned Citizens of Montauk](#).

Tooman says this is the result of structures built right on the dunes.

“The primary dune is not functioning properly, so it’s not allowing the beach to migrate like it should naturally,” says Tooman. “What we’re seeing is the beach just pulling back and just eroding and eroding and there’s nowhere for it to go.”

Montauk worked with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to stabilize the shoreline and reinforce the dunes with giant school bus-sized sandbags.

“What’s been done is not even a band-aid. It’s not protecting the beach anymore,” says Tooman.

Town officials published [a study](#) in 2018 that calls for a shoreline “retreat” to abandon or move some low-lying motels away from the shore. They hope this will let the dunes heal. But the motel owners and operators don’t want to move.



Steve Kalimnios, operator of Royal Atlantic Beach Resorts, worries about the financial impact of coastal relocation.

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Steve Kalimnios, the operator of Royal Atlantic Beach Resorts, worries about the conclusions of the study, and he has a lot of questions.

“What is the economic impact on a community?” asks Kalimnios. His property could be required to move many

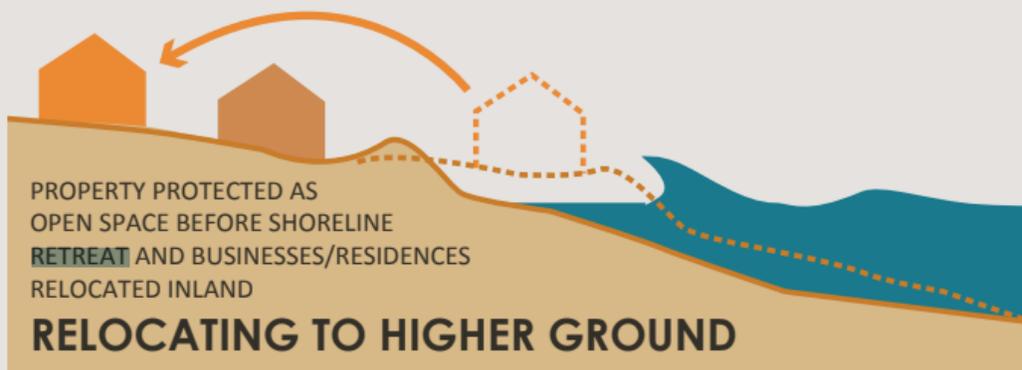
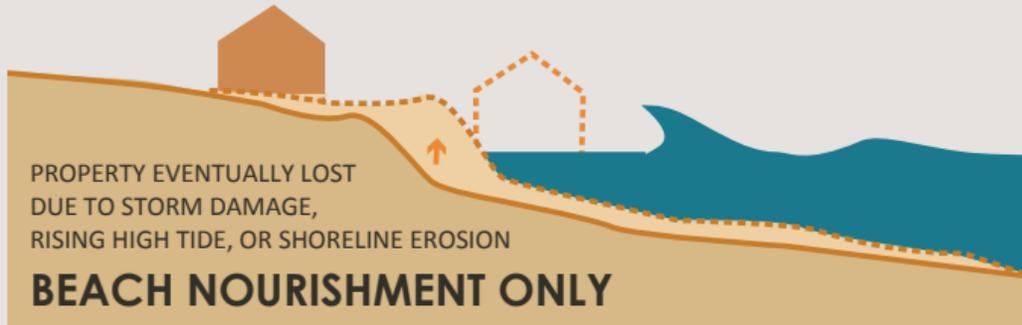
of its motel rooms away from the shore.

If you lose 600 hotel rooms, how is that going to impact all the restaurants, stores and shops?”

He wants an economic impact study to see what will happen to Montauk’s businesses if these rooms are forced to move.

Many business owners want to remove any call for coastal relocation from the study.

Resilience Strategy Alternatives | Montauk



Possible solutions available to preserve commercial and residential properties along Montauk's shoreline.
CREDIT COURTESY OF THE TOWN OF EAST HAMPTON

“Maybe the answer is beach nourishment, maybe the answer is jetties, those are things that should be explored before you jump to ‘let’s run for the hills,’” says Kalimnios.

He and other business owners want the town to focus on rebuilding the beach with more sand that’s either trucked in or dredged from the bottom of the ocean.

Environmentalists say beach replenishment is a short-term plan that costs millions of dollars every few years and will keep getting more and more expensive. They believe the restoration of a natural dune system is the best way to preserve coastal communities.

Kevin McAllister, president of [Defend H2O](#), a non-profit group that advocates for shoreline resiliency, believes coastal relocation needs to be implemented to protect Montauk’s beaches.

“As much as the hotel rooms have a contribution to the local economy, without a recreational beach here in the summer you’re not going to have the visitors,” says McAllister.

McAllister believes Montauk’s decisions could have larger ramifications.

If the town goes ahead with a relocation plan, other coastal communities will have a blueprint to follow.

If it doesn’t, McAllister says this could dull momentum for an appropriate response to climate change.

Beach erosion is a problem along coasts throughout the world as rising sea-levels meet commercial and residential properties along shorelines.

“We can’t just wait and consider it a problem for the future, bury our heads in the sand and not worry about it until the next generation,” said Alison Branco, director of coastal programs for the [Nature Conservancy in New York](#).

The Montauk study is just a suggestion for a relocation plan, and it still needs approval from the East Hampton Town Board, which has jurisdiction over the community.

“It’s a really hard conversation to talk about – changing the face of your town,” said Branco. “We really need to get started.”