

Montauk Plan for Resilience Faces Resistance From Some

Montauk hamlet plan finally nearing completion

By Christopher Walsh

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The Montauk hamlet study is nearing completion and heading toward a public hearing, the East Hampton Town Board and a consultant having fine-tuned language on multiple elements on Tuesday, but the long-range plan for a strategic retreat from the downtown ocean beach remains a sticking point among members of the hamlet's business community, one of whom told the board that not one downtown motel owner "sees any future in what we're doing."

The goal of the hamlet studies, which have been underway since 2015, is to provide the town with a vision statement, a set of cohesive and achievable plans to improve functionality, connectivity, and aesthetics while building resilience against projected sea level rise and extreme weather as symptoms of climate change are increasingly felt locally and around the world.

Meeting at the Montauk Firehouse, the board and the consultant Lisa Liquori of Fine Arts and Sciences, a former town planning director, honed language in a draft plan, which was not accessible to those attending the meeting, prompting one to complain that it was difficult to follow the deliberations.

Broad-brush goals include improving traffic circulation and parking, a cyclist and pedestrian-friendly path connecting the hubs of the downtown commercial core, the Long Island Rail Road station, and the docks, improving Montauk's aesthetic qualities to reflect its historical character, and protecting infrastructure from projected flooding, storms, and sea level rise.

Resilience is a theme in the study of the easternmost hamlet, particularly with respect to the beaches that draw the tourists who fill its motel rooms, restaurants, and shops. But the hamlet study's vision to protect that economic engine by moving existing infrastructure out of low-lying, shorefront areas and replacing it with naturalized buffers against the sea revealed the lingering disconnect between those crafting policy and those who will live and work by it, despite predictions cited by Ms. Liquori including a loss of nearly three feet of beach to erosion per year between 2000 and 2012 and a high tide 8 to 30 inches above today's by 2050.

The draft plan illustrates a transfer of a development rights program under which oceanfront property owners, many of them along South Emerson Avenue, would voluntarily abandon present locations for upland property while maintaining zoning rights for density of use, allowing their existing property to revert to natural dune. In theory, such a scheme would allow the downtown to remain essentially where it is while adapting to a changing shoreline. Motels reconstructed inland may be required to incorporate resilient strategies such as "floodable" first-floor parking masked by vegetative screening, for example. The study envisions South Essex Street, which runs perpendicular to South Emerson, as a future commercial hub.

But board members, seeking to soften what some oceanfront business owners apparently perceived as a directive, asked that maps depicting specific structures as potential candidates for abandonment be deleted from the draft plan. "Folks were getting nervous about, we're mapping stuff out as if we could move buildings around like on a Monopoly board," said Councilman Jeff Bragman.

“We don’t know what’s going to be coming up in the next 10, 20, 30 years — we have to evolve, too,” said Councilman David Lys. To shorefront property owners, he said, “No one is going to take away your property rights.”

“This is the 30,000-foot view,” added Councilwoman Kathee Burke-Gonzalez.

What the board is attempting, said Supervisor Peter Van Scoyoc, “is to come up with strategies, acknowledge the reality of sea level rise and storms, and plan for those eventualities. But not all that planning has taken place.” Efforts underway to create a wastewater district and an erosion control district, the federal Army Corps of Engineers’ Fire Island to Montauk Reformulation Plan, the Suffolk County Health Department’s regulations with respect to sanitary systems, and residents’ wishes will also shape Montauk’s future, he said.

Reaction to the discussion was mixed. “It looks like we’re closing in on something,” said Laura Tooman, president of Concerned Citizens of Montauk. While there are “some great recommendations in the plan,” she said, “a lot more needs to be done to advance those concepts.”

Ed Braun, the chairman of C.C.O.M.’s board and a member of the Montauk Citizens Advisory Committee, urged the board to proceed with goals outlined in the discussion in order to allow implementation and further steps. “I think we’ve reached a point where we have a very usable direction and plan,” he said. “The danger of delay is greater, in my mind, than waiting to perfect the plan. The problems you’re addressing — environment, sea level rise, climate change — those don’t get easier in the next three to five years. We need to address them now, even if the plan isn’t perfect.”

Steve Kalimnios, who owns the oceanfront Royal Atlantic resort and adjacent motels and earlier this year predicted a near 50-percent loss of rooms at motels relocated from the shoreline, again criticized the managed retreat outlined in the draft plan. “I still feel there are more questions than answers,” he told the board, asking again for an economic impact analysis and feasibility study.

“I’m seeing nothing as it relates to protecting the future of our town,” Mr. Kalimnios said. He is insured, he said, and should his motels be wiped out by a surging sea, “when I receive that payoff from insurance, what this board has never addressed is what are you going to do to convince me to take those dollars and reinvest in our community?” Every other motel owner feels the same way, he asserted.

“You can’t do everything all at once,” Mr. Van Scoyoc said. “We’re not going to be able to get everything done today or this year, but this highlights a path to go down. We know we need to engage an economic study to understand what is possible, how to make sure downtown remains viable as these things change. . . . I don’t think any of us here, like yourself, think all these questions have been answered.”

But historically, civilizations adapt to change or perish, the supervisor said. “This is an opportunity for us to take a long view to agree as a community as to what we can do over time.” The hamlet study, he said, is just a roadmap, albeit to an uncertain future, one that will inevitably require further steps.

“This plan,” said Councilwoman Sylvia Overby, “is mapping out, hopefully, a path to survival for the business community... This is a study to say we want you to survive. You may not be able to where you’re located now, but there might be an area where you can survive later.”

“Right now,” Mr. Van Scoyoc said, “we’re playing Russian roulette with the Atlantic Ocean.”