

Residence

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'The Picture Of Vulnerable'

Waves batter the Montauk shoreline during a storm. As sea levels rise, existing bulkheads will not be enough to prevent flooding of waterfront homes, and even inland property will be at greater risk. ©PHOTOFILE

Montauk is at the center of the East End's climate change concerns

BY MICHELLE TRAVING

A century ago, a smattering of about 50 wooden shacks dotted the water's edge in Montauk. They were home to 300 people, mostly commercial fishermen from Nova Scotia and their families, who transformed the alcove into a vibrant village — complete with a school and restaurant, a post office and bar, a telephone exchange, a store, and a pier that could house 30 boats.

Life, for a time, was simple enough, albeit rough — without running water, light or electricity to power the village, which relied on coal from the nearby railroad for heat and the adjacent dune for shelter from wind and storms.

But it wasn't enough. When the Hurricane of 1938 slammed into the East End, it swept through the small village and ripped it to pieces, taking most of the ramshackle homes along with it — splintering the meager community that hugged the low-lying arc of Fort Pond Bay.

THE RISING TIDE

While some residents attempted to put their houses back on their foundations, many declared the area unsafe and vowed never to return, mooring their boats to Lake Montauk, which founded the current Montauk Harbor fishing village — kickstarting the eventual disap-

pearance of the Fort Pond Bay community altogether.

This isn't the only piece of Montauk history lost to the sea during extreme weather events, according to East Hampton Town Supervisor Peter Van Scoyoc. In this day, after a heavy scouring at Dutch Plains, remnants of foundations once belonging to hotels and Coast Guard stations peek out from under the lapping waves — a ghost of what was, and a specter of what could come again, he says, if climate change continues at its current pace, experts say.

"Sea level is rising at a much faster rate, and it's predicted to increase over the next 60 to 100 years," Van Scoyoc said. "If we look back over the past 100 years, downtown Montauk had another whole road parallel to the ocean called Highwater — and guess where it is? It's underneath the Atlantic now."

"It's inevitable, I think, in low-lying areas, with sea level rise and erosion, that some of those areas will be lost to us," he added.

Wedged between rising waters

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MONTAUK: Climate Change Will Take A Toll

BY PHILIP

from both the ocean and the bay. Montauk's downtown and low-lying residential areas — positioned on a narrow strip of dunes and marshland — are at the crux of a discussion surrounding climate change on the East End, perhaps more than any other location in the region.

Last Friday, East Hampton Town released the latest version of its Coastal Assessment Resilience Plan, or CAR2, a planning tool that identifies key coastal risks and examines how the town should plan to guard against and adapt to them in the coming decades, according to Albert Standa, acting director of climate adaptation for the Nassau County Executive New York, who sits on its advisory board.

"Generally, we're already in a really big problem in Montauk. We're at that emergency point already," he said. "If I owned a home in Montauk, I'd have to be very worried because it's not going to be there."

The Nassau County website lists that on October 22, 2011, more than 10 years since Superstorm Sandy left an irreversible mark on the East End — physically, through the towers, villages and hamlets that dot the Long Island coast, and in the memories of those who were here to experience it.

The hurricanes hit the East End with winds as high as 80 mph, dominating miles of ocean beaches and leaving more than 40,000 South Fork homes and businesses without power. Tearing waves crashed on the shores and the storm surge flooded low-lying areas — the worst effects of the storm, locally, hit Montauk, where the town was hit nearly straight on in the center at several oceanic points and some beachside homes were damaged or destroyed.

"The whole town rose of islands was basically testing itself over the ocean. Literally, the beach was gone. Some of the remaining pools collapsed into the beach," Van Scoyoc recalled. "I have not had a definite shift in beach profile since the ocean and the three days Hurricane Sandy. That kind of sand it never had to people."

Despite the level of devastation, Superstorm Sandy's impact was considered just a glancing blow to the East End — and nothing compared to the fury unleashed to the Hurricane of 2011. According to CAR2, the chance of experiencing a flood event with a significant storm that at least once over the next 30 years, is about 60 percent.

"That does not bode well for Montauk," Franco said.

"Montauk is super vulnerable. Montauk is the picture of vulnerability," she said. "It's a low-lying area, it has water coming from both directions, plus up underneath in the groundwater. And if you think about the sea level, Montauk is the end. It is the very tip of a long, thin peninsula sticking out into the middle of the ocean."

"If you imagine the ocean coming up the East Coast, the way our coastline is shaped, they come up along the shoreline and then they hit into Long Island," she continued. "So you can imagine how vulnerable Montauk is to those big storms — not to mention just the more chronic sea level rise impacts."

In February, a report by its members from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said that the United States is expected to see an ocean sea level rise as high as 6.6 feet by 2100 — which, for many coastal communities, means it might be 1 foot, on average — by then.



A map in the latest draft of the Coastal Assessment Resilience Plan shows East Hampton Town transformed into a series of islands, as shown by the elliptical shaded areas. If no action is taken to combat sea level rise.

COURTESY OF CAR2 PLAN

By 2100, that number could reach as high as 7 feet, though the report noted that these long-term estimates are less certain.

"You can debate all these different models out there, but at the end of the day, it doesn't matter because there's all sorts of the same thing in the end," said Laura Franco, executive director of the Community Climate of Montauk. "It doesn't matter what the numbers are because they're continuing to go worse."

The action is taken, the rate of sea level and water temperature rise — compounded by increasing flood frequency and intensity, and accelerated storm surge erosion — would be devastating to East Hampton Town. A striking graphic in the CAR2 draft report shows what the region could look like as early as 2070, marked by tidal flood inundation and areas of permanent submergence — including parts of Springs, Montauk and all of Sagaponag.

"Predictions of a sea level rise of 2000 could be even more than that — there's a good chance that we'll have a series of Montauk islands," Van Scoyoc said. "That is the natural progression of what's happening."

Back in the 1980s and 1990s, the homes of Don and Captain Kidd's Park had eroded from 100 to 200 feet of beach in front of them, Van Scoyoc said. Being that used to go, residential areas near Don and Bay Lake Montauk and Dutch Place are the most of particular concern, he said, where water has breached on both sides of the land bridges during storms.

"People have to keep in mind that if you have waterfront property, you're really only seeing it from the Atlantic Ocean or Block Island Sound. That means landers may not see it when you're not there, and people need to be cognizant of that when they purchase properties," he said. "If you envision moving them back or making them up — or understand that, at some point, they may go away and you may not have the ability to rebuild them."

But the impact of sea level rise, as they track down in East Hampton Town, are not considered to be overlooked as emphasized Director of Planning Jeremy Sorenstein.

"There is a corresponding rise between sea level and groundwater; the water table rises in a one-to-one ratio with the rising sea level," he said. "In addition to us having real concerns about what can we build and where can we build it in a sea-level rise area, in low-lying areas that aren't necessary on the shoreline, we have a very real set of concerns about what will the impacts be of a rising water table."

Those impacts are already happening, according to Kevin McAllister, founder and CEO of Dekalb H2O, a nonprofit dedicated to protecting Long Island's various bodies of water. Stormy day flooding,



Exposed gas tanks sandbags along the front row in Montauk.

PHILIP

where areas of lower elevation are overlaid with water during fall and low tides, is prevalent in Montauk, where a higher water table also means that lawn chemicals and septic systems are string in groundwater.

"It's a daunting issue," he said of the impacts of climate change as a whole. "To make the decisions today that are going to benefit 30, 40, 50 years out when you just don't see the impact, they're reticent to do it because there's such political heat."

Using The Deal Architect. When considering the impacts of climate change on Montauk — sea level rise and fast-eroding beaches, shrinking shorelines and rising-day flooding, an elevated water table and declining water quality — the answer needs to be a multi-pronged approach, environmentalists agree.

"Things are already starting to happen to try to control those problems and try to protect the people and the businesses and the homes in Montauk from those problems," Franco said, "including putting a lot of sand on the beach to try to put back all the sand that the ocean is eroding, as fast as it can, because of sea level rise."

In 2011, three years post-Sandy, hundreds of Montauk water users looked to the town to protect the Downtown Montauk Emergency Stabilization Project, which placed 15,000 1.5-ton portable sandbags along more than a half-mile of compromised shoreline, which were then covered by about 3 feet of sand, to the tune of \$60 million.

Ultimately, Dekalb H2O, along with The Surfside Foundation, failed to stop the project from happening, said McAllister, a staunch critic of sand replenishment projects.

"For the system to function and to have a sustainable beach in there, we have to restore a real dune system, in conjunction with the beach," he said. "We need to put back a primary dune that can provide natural replenishment of

the existing beach."

So to begin next year, the town and Don and Bay Lake Montauk Park, before finalizing the CAR2, will dump millions of tons of sand along its miles of beach. Local government — a project that will cost the federal government more than \$1.5 billion for what is widely regarded as a temporary solution, Franco said.

"What's really important is a recognition by a lot of folks that some solutions are short-term in nature and some are long-term in nature and what we really need for Montauk is a combination of those two," she said, adding, "Hopefully over the next 20 years, when we're continuing to put sand on the beach to keep things safe for now, we'll start to see all these long-term solutions getting implemented."

The CAR2 draft — which Van Scoyoc said he anticipates will be presented to the East Hampton Town Board for adoption this spring — offers a range of strategies to cut down on building codes in vulnerable areas to reduce future property damage.

"If one house says to themselves, 'The flooding is too bad, I don't want to live in this building anymore,' the last thing you want to see is them build a new house. You have to have all of their money into that place, and Don and Bay Lake said that it's also not suitable to them," Franco said. "Once it gets to that point where it just feels unviable for the people there, if possible, you want to try to get it out of residential areas."

She urges the use of the Community Preservation Fund to purchase properties that would be dedicated to "managed retreat," which includes relocation and/or property acquisition and conversion to non-residential use. The report asks community outreach and funding should start now, but implementation work, for the most part, not start for another decade due to the town and property owner challenges.

"We all have to understand

that our relationship to the shoreline has to be reset," Sorenstein said. "The coastline itself is receding, and we have to respond accordingly to the changing reality that is re-emerging, that emergency action will be able to exist in that same place, in its same form, forevermore."

Part of the battle will be overcoming the negative connotation associated with the word "retreat" — Van Scoyoc said he himself "brings" whenever he leaves the town — not to mention the sheer logistics and the financial and emotional implications that come from moving away from the shore.

"Even if you don't own a home on the beach in Montauk, that whole idea of evacuation, Montauk is part of your lifestyle, part of where you live, part of what you identify with it, so it's very personal and very emotional for folks," Franco said. "It's not really hard to envision that being so great, but looking different, and that's natural — but that's where we need to put our work in, in the near future."

"We need to get the community together to envision, 'What if we don't have it but exactly like it does today, what would we need to look like? What are our new vision for Montauk?'"

The Planning Department will be integral in this process, Franco said, and she emphasized that the entire community needs to get involved in these conversations — not just business owners, but local residents, too.

"It's easier to not talk about hard stuff," Sorenstein said. "And what we're finding is when we don't have the hard conversations before the time comes, it's really hard to make important decisions when they're needed."

"What we know is that the world is changing and we cannot continue to have the same response and believe that we're going to somehow have better than we have up until now," he added. "We really have to bring low-lying and vulnerable areas to the table. After reviewing the CAR2

draft, McAllister said he is hopeful — though he quickly pointed to a number of management plans that have fallen by the wayside, including the Montauk Harbor Study, the Local Waterfront Revitalization Plan and Comprehensive Plan in East Hampton, and Periodic Estuary Partnership Governance/Conservation Management Plan.

"I see that some of the concepts I've been repeatedly speaking to have been incorporated in the plan. I'm pleased to see it in writing, but will need the response, the sale of CAR2 will be found of management action that is not a one-time resource protection plan, but also language because the political courage required to ensure was quickly with pushback from opposing interests. Nevertheless, issues for reserved attention."

From year to year, season to season, Franco wishes the Montauk coastline still — at a seemingly healthy beach is washed away by a small recession until it is replenished once more — and he's a devotee of remember that what is going on is just not sustainable."

In Montauk, a few of the tiny wooden shacks remain from the old Post Pond Bay fishing village, marking the edge of what used to be a thriving community — one that, after the Hurricane of 2011, considered the frame of its damaged but environment and needed to be rebuilt.

"I think we have to look at what the lessons of history are here," Sorenstein said. "People did the sensible thing and went, 'Should we just rebuild the same place that is in the same place, or should we move?' And they came to the right conclusion and said, 'We will have better over time if we move.'"

Ultimately, the final arbitrator is Mother Nature and none of us, of course, can control that, he added. "We can do it with together or come up with a sensible response to the changes that are happening around us that allows us to preserve the things that we value most."