

‘Retreat’ Is Officially In Coastal Plan

Strategies Respond to Sea Level Rise

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East Hampton Town this week adopted the Coastal Assessment and Resiliency Plan, a two-year analysis of the town’s vulnerabilities to the likely impacts of rising sea levels over the decades ahead and guidelines for how to react — including plans for a “retreat” of waterfront development away from the shoreline.

The study, which was steered by an appointed committee of residents, business owners and planning experts, evaluates a wide variety of potential coastal risks facing East Hampton’s communities and businesses as sea level rises through the middle of the century.

The adopted draft plan is designed to provide a general framework for the town as it seeks to craft a system of zoning and other policies to be in place by the time sea level rise becomes a more urgent and threatening concern over the next 40 years.

“Rising sea levels and increased intensity of coastal storms undoubtedly will have an impact on nearshore homes and communities,” the town’s preamble to the study reads. “The need to design resilient projects and policies is urgent.”

During a public hearing on the proposed draft plan last month, some of those who helped craft it extolled the virtues of getting the plan on the books now so that the town can get to work on more of the step-by-step, nitty-gritty plans left to be worked out. “This plan is a first step,” said Laura Tooman, the president of the Concerned Citizens of Montauk and the co-chair of the committee that steered the crafting of the CARP study, during a public hearing last month. “There are many more steps that need to be done to make our environment more sustainable, our community more sustainable, Montauk more sustainable and our business community more sustainable.”

The CARP study, which is available in its entirety on the town website, ehamptonny.gov, was modeled after and is a companion to the town’s Hamlet Study project, conducted from 2016 to 2018.

Both studies drew on input from residents of the areas that it was focusing on about key features of various regions and what residents saw as important aspects to preserve or protect while adapting for the presumed inevitability of sea level rise over the decades.

The plan looks at 11 focus areas throughout the town where rising sea levels are likely to cause complications in the coming decades, and examines possible ways those areas could adapt to remain viable residential or business regions.

Montauk's downtown, Lazy Point in Amagansett and some low-lying areas of the Gardiners Bay coastline are of particular focus, and the plan lays out a mixture of recommendations for when some areas should gird against intermittent impacts from storms, when development should be adapted to absorb more frequent inundations while remaining in place between them and when development in certain areas should be abandoned entirely.

Much like in the Hamlet Study, the most controversial component of the plan has been the recommendation that the town start devising a system of transferable development rights and crafting new zoning maps that would allow the hotels along downtown Montauk's oceanfront to someday be razed and either relocated to new areas or the "rights" to each of their rooms transferred and recreated in new buildings or properties out of harm's way from the threat of severe coastal storms.

Alison Branco, climate adaptation coordinator for The Nature Conservancy, said that there are benefits to getting the plan inked as quickly as possible — including in robust funding from federal and state agencies.

"The opportunity right now is unprecedented," she said, noting a host of funding grant sources for coastal resiliency work that are about to be awarded. "By adopting this plan, you can place yourselves at the front of the line to receive funding."

While there was significant criticism of the retreat idea from some Montauk residents and business owners during the Hamlet Study and, somewhat less so, the CARP study, the adopted plan does not make any hard-and-fast requirements about how the recommendations be implemented.

Like many of the plan's recommendations, the details of the retreat proposal will be left to future groups of town officials and stakeholders to hammer out after additional years of analysis and debate. Some said the plan should be even more insistent on things like coastal retreat. During discussions of the plan and during the public hearing last month, coastal development advocate Kevin McAllister, founder of the nonprofit Defend H₂O, said that the town should be incorporating firm deadlines for when coastal retreat policies will be in place and areas tagged for relocation put on the chopping block for condemnation.

"While we're talking about the voluntary track, I would urge the board to look at the compelling track — condemnations," McAllister said. "I have advocated for date certain — when are we moving back? The plan identifies 15 years — I ask the board to be poised at 15 years to condemn these properties."

McAllister also has been critical of the reliance over the next 30 years on a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers effort to use sand replenishment to rebuild beaches to increase their protective buffer against severe storms, which he says gives a false sense of security that is not sustainable and will only dampen the spirit for planning for more drastic steps like coastal retreat.

McAllister applauded recommendations in the plan for drafting zoning regulations that will limit the construction of new buildings or replacement of heavily damaged structures in areas deemed to be in particularly vulnerable situations as storms worsen and seas rise so that "we're not investing significant money into properties we should be pulling back."

Also among the recommendations in the study are preparing for raising homes above higher coastal flooding levels, rising roadways that run along the waterfront, new shoreline setbacks for homes — and the consideration of constructing a levee along Industrial Road in Montauk.

The coastline there is relatively stable under normal conditions but, at a maximum of just 8 feet above sea level, is vulnerable to a washover by storm surge during a major hurricane, which could cause extensive “back-door flooding” and damage to critical infrastructure and the downtown area.

The report sketches out a levee running through the low-lying strip of land between the two water bodies, along the Long Island Rail Road tracks, from approximately Shore Road to where the land rises again behind the Rough Riders condominiums.

The CARP study was guided by the consulting firms GZA GeoEnvironmental, Dodson & Flinker and Coastal Ocean Analytics. Representatives from a wide range of business, community leadership and government departments from East Hampton town and village, sat on the advisory committee that helped draft the recommendations.

The study acknowledges that much of the work left to be done will be in the form of education, and making the realities of sea level rise that may not be apparent in the day-to-day lives of many residents, and even some business owners, more clear.

Getting a head start is key, advocates said.

“We’re lucky here because this town has been thinking about and working on adapting to these threats for longer than most,” Branco said. “This is truly a nation-leading effort to prepare this town for a future with a lot more water and helping it adapt to live with that water rather than fight against it.”