

A Choice To Be Made

The choice for Long Island in a time of climate change and rise in sea level is between “forever beaches or sand-be-gone seawalls,” says Kevin McAllister.

“Something has to give,” says the founding president of Sag Harbor-based organization Defend H2O. “It should be crystal clear which one. It’s time for collective foresight. Our environment, economy and lifestyle depend on it.”

In sounding this message recently via email, he included a photo of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers project involving the placement of “geotextile” sandbags on 3,100 feet of beach in Montauk in 2016, at a cost of \$8.4 million. Since then, there have been two substantial washouts, with repairs costing \$700,000 each time. And major washouts from the nor’easters this winter are anticipated to cost \$1.05 million to repair. “Downtown Montauk” is the title of the stark and ugly picture of the sandbag revetment.

Is this a model for the future of Long Island? Hopefully not!

“These hardening structures—these sandbags—have destroyed the beachfront at Montauk,” said Mr. McAllister. There are only a few sections through which people can now get access to this half mile of Montauk beach, he points out.

Are the sandbags protecting Montauk? “They are protecting private property interests while sacrificing public use,” he said.

“We need to implement coastal retreat,” Mr. McAllister emphasized. “We have to relocate structures and restore the primary dune in this area—and in many other locations.”

The State Department of Environmental Conservation last year issued a “medium projection” of sea level rise for Long Island of 16 inches by the 2050s, and a “high projection” by then of 30 inches, Mr. McAllister points out.

“There will be monumental change along the Long Island coast,” says Mr. McAllister. “There will be a higher groundwater table and what is termed coastal inundation—or, in other words, persistent flooding. The groundwater will be rising from below. And the shoreline will be migrating.

“So we’d have to be spend exorbitant amounts of money to pump sand all the time”—sand folly, or perpetual beach nourishment, which is economically and environmentally unsustainable—“or take the

option of ‘armoring the coast’ in versions of the Montauk mess.” Or a third option: retreat in the more vulnerable areas.

For examples of locations of significant Long Island sea level rise necessitating retreat, he cites Dune Road in Southampton Town, Hashamomuck Cove in Southold on the North Fork, Gerard Drive in Springs in East Hampton Town, along the bayfront in Mastic Beach, “and what I refer to as the ‘front row’ of motels in downtown Montauk. These are clear examples of where relocation or coastal retreat is critical.”

He continues, “But every coastal area will be impacted—the oceanfront the worst, but even Shelter Island’s sheltered waters will rise, as well as all the harbors of Long Island.” The Fire Island barrier beach, he said, “will be especially vulnerable.”

“Properties need to be appraised and receiving areas—where these structures can be moved—identified. For instance, if there is a vacant lot across the street from a motel, it might go there, or be rebuilt elsewhere.”

The “larger, worldly issue” involves the main cause of climate change, global warming and sea level rise—the burning of fossil fuels. “The result is the production of greenhouse gases, melting of glaciers, thermal expansion of the oceans and elevation of the seas,” he says.

Climate change denial and refusal by the Trump administration to address climate change and take steps to mitigate global warming is a “political tragedy,” says Mr. McAllister.

What can we do? We must act politically, he says, and even though President Donald Trump has decided to pull the United States out of the Paris Climate Accord, people must press for a reversal.

“The planet is being threatened,” says Mr. McAllister. And the threat isn’t necessary. A transition to green, renewable energy—led by solar and wind—to replace fossil fuel can reverse this enormous and insoluble problem in the long run if the way things are going now continues.”

The headline of a piece in *New Scientist* magazine last year: “Future New York will be flooded.” It noted how “climate change will make hurricanes more likely to hit the Northeast U.S.” The climate change horror is unnecessary, avoidable.



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