SHORING UP FIRE ISLAND EROSION

After storms, a call for feds to replenish sands

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Fire Island has suffered some of its worst erosion in years after being pummeled by recent storms, officials and residents said Tuesday.

As a result, they are pleading with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to extend a sand replenishment project scheduled for this fall on the western end of Fire Island to hard-hit communities farther to the east.

"Over the last week or two we have seen enormous erosion from west to east," Brookhaven Town Supervisor Edward P. Romaine said at a news conference at Davis Park, one of the affected communities.

"We're hoping that they are concerned about the danger that we face here," he said, referring to the Army Corps of Engineers. "It's real and it's present and the next storm could be devastating and we don't want to see that happen."

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has not responded to the request, Romaine said. It did not respond Tuesday to a request for comment.

The affected communities in Brookhaven also include Sea View, Point o' Woods, Cherry Grove and Fire Island Pines, officials said.



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Brookhaven Town Supervisor Edward P. Romaine cited "enormous erosion" over last week or two at Davis Park. ■ Video: newsday.com/longisland

Eaten away at least 50 feet

The storms have eaten away at least 50 feet of beach at Davis Park, with the Atlantic Ocean surging under a boardwalk leading to the locally well-known Casino bar and restaurant at the top of the dunes, said Brookhaven Town Councilman Neil Foley.

He framed the erosion as not only a threat to Fire Island, but also to the mainland, since the barrier beach serves as a buffer when storms and hurricanes strike the area.

"This is not a cosmetic issue. This is not a beach issue, per se," Foley said. "This is a safety issue. This dune saves peoples' lives during storms."



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Officials fear that if erosion at the beach at Davis Park on Fire Island goes untreated it will eventually affect the interior lands.

Foley said extending the project further east would cost about $2 million, which he called a worthwhile investment given the tens of thousands of people who visit the barrier beach and its role in protecting the mainland.

Ara Daglian, 59, who owns a home at Davis Park, said the erosion was among the worst he has seen during his lifetime of visiting Fire Island.

"We've seen huge movement of sand. It's mind-boggling," he said. "This was pretty startling to all of us."

Officials said they feared that without Army Corps intervention, another storm could lead to property destruction and the ocean slicing another inlet through Fire Island. That would connect the Atlantic to the Great South Bay and potentially cause environmental and flooding problems.

'Never looked like this'

Henry Robin, president of the Fire Island Pines Property Owners Association, said at the news conference, "I approach you today terrified of the conditions on Fire Island Pines. I've been coming out for 25 years. Our beaches have never looked like this."

Scientists said erosion at Fire Island has been a perennial problem and part of a natural process. Storms accelerate that process. In 2012, Superstorm Sandy took away more than half of the island's prestorm volume of sand, a federal study found.

The problem, experts said, is when people construct houses on a constantly shifting barrier island. Authorities must then decide whether to intervene.

'Dynamic' barrier islands

Barrier islands and beaches "are very dynamic, they're constantly shifting, changing," said Professor J. Bret Bennington, chairman of the Department of Geology, Environment, and Sustainability at Hofstra University.

"That's a normal, natural process but it becomes problematic because we build stuff on the barrier islands and we don't want the beaches to change under the buildings we've made," he said.

Sand replenishment "works pretty well but eventually a storm will come along and take the sand away, and it's incredibly expensive," he said.

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