By refusing to replenish beaches, U.S. Army Corps risks a Fire Island disaster



Davis Park, looking east, on Fire Island. Credit: Newsday/Steve Pfost

By Henry Robin and Tom Ruskin
Guest essay
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In September, a series of storms devastated the east end communities of Fire Island, reducing many beaches to little more than three feet in width at points, the worst conditions this 32-mile barrier beach island has experienced in decades. The damage has triggered a public safety emergency, as fire, police and utility vehicles can no longer reach several communities because the beach is the only method of transportation.

Even more alarming has been the unthinkable failure of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to come to our aid, even as they prepare to dredge areas of the island just a few hundred feet away. Their

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indifference may cost lives.

Not long ago, many of the beaches stretching from Seaview to Davis Park, were nearly 160 feet wide, thanks to beach replenishment assistance provided by the Army Corps after Superstorm Sandy. The agency is legally responsible for maintaining its work for two decades. Yet it has rejected calls for emergency repairs from Sens. Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand, incoming Suffolk County Executive Ed Romaine, and community leaders like ourselves.

What the Army Corps has not considered in its rejection of our requests for emergency beach repair is the impact on public safety. Its benchmarks of extraordinary wind, water or wave action miss the mark when it comes to protecting lives.

Fire Island is protected by what's called a mutual aid agreement; each community's fire and police departments respond to calls on the island, no matter where they occur. This is the only way to ensure adequate and swift responses to emergencies like fires. There are no roads leading from one community to another. Driving on the beach is the only way personnel can respond to an emergency.

In 2011, almost half the commercial district in Fire Island Pines went up in flames on a November night, when just a handful of volunteer firefighters were on the island to respond to the blaze. Firefighters from virtually every Fire Island community rushed by driving on our beach to battle the inferno, attempting to contain it as mainland Long Island fire companies gathered for a 20-minute ferry ride to the Pines. The same type of fire occurred a few years ago in Ocean Bay Park, when a winter house fire quickly spread in high winds to adjoining homes. If not for the rapid mutual response from other communities' fire departments by driving on our beach, more Ocean Bay Park residential homes would have been lost.

If the beaches were impassable those nights, as they are now, those communities could have been destroyed.

The most disheartening aspect of the Army Corps' refusal to approve an emergency repair project is that the agency will be repairing Fire Island's western beaches in a matter of weeks. It is incomprehensible that the Army Corps would deny our request to expand the scope of the work to communities within walking distance of the project. We need their help desperately.

It has been a shocking experience to see beaches, broad just a few years ago, reduced to nothing more than thin paths. With the current state of damage, those on the barrier island are more vulnerable than ever because of the threat to public safety. The fate of our communities rests with the Army Corps.

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We are not asking the agency to do anything unprecedented or beyond the scope of its responsibilities. We are simply asking that it do its job.

This guest essay reflects the views of Henry Robin, president of the Fire Island Pines Property Owners' Association, and Tom Ruskin, president of the Seaview Association.

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