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The beach plan: where do we stand?

City awaits final proposal for \$85M Army Corps project

by Chris Munzing

September 25, 2003

As Isabel spared New York's beaches but blasted the Mid-Atlantic states, local officials await the United States Army Corps of Engineers' (USACE) supposed final \$85 million barrier beach "protection" plan.

The latest proposed Storm Damage Reduction Project, which the Army Corps claims will revitalize the barrier island's beaches and protect it from future storms, will be presented to the Long Beach City Council in December or January.

The long-discussed plan calls for the refurbishment of the island's jetties, or groins, the addition of four new groins off Point Lookout, the addition 110 feet of beach using dredged sand, and -- the controversial portion -- a 75-foot-wide dune running most of the length of the island, from Point Lookout through Long Beach. The project would take several years to complete.

The beaches would then be replenished with dredged sand every five years for the next 50 years. Access to the beach from the boardwalk would most likely be made possible through the use of "finger" boardwalks, spans that would extend to the beach over the dune.

"I'm anxious to see the final report," said City Council President Joel Crystal, who wants to get the plans to the public. Crystal is hopeful that some of the suggestions made by the city to the USACE to adjust the plan for Long Beach will be taken into consideration.

One feature that Crystal would like to see included in the final plan is boardwalk peninsulas. The peninsulas would resemble piers, extending over the dune onto the beach and creating boardwalk plazas. Such peninsulas could be used for viewing summer beach concerts and volleyball tournaments, which would have to be moved away from the main boardwalk to accommodate the dune.

Long Beach is expected to be on the hook for roughly \$6 million of the project's estimated \$85 million cost, according to Crystal. The cost would be spread over several years so the city wouldn't be hit with a large seven-figure bill all at once, he said.

The council president added that several in-house studies are being conducted, both on the city's preparedness for a large-scale disaster and on the success of dune protection in communities along the Eastern Seaboard that were hit by Hurricane Isabel.

"We all had a taste of a powerful storm," said Crystal. "We really have to have some real knowledge."

USACE Project Manager Anthony Sciorra said that the finished draft proposal would be in the hands of city officials by the middle of January, with the plans then being presented to the public in late winter.

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Several elements of the plan have to be adjusted, such as the projected costs -- whose estimates are now several years old -- the removal of East Atlantic Beach, which has been dropped from the project, and the issue of piping plover. The piping plover is an endangered species with nesting areas throughout the barrier island. Sciorra said that the bird wasn't endangered 10 years ago when initial plans were drawn up.

Sciorra, who has worked on similar projects in Rockaway and on the Jersey Shore, said that those areas have seen beach growth and protection. With Isabel, Sciorra said there were "no reports of flooding where we've done projects, primarily in New Jersey, which was a little harder hit. Before, there certainly would've been."

"[Hurricane Isabel] showed us that, at some point, its storm track had us in its sight," said City Council Vice President Scott Nigro. Nigro is in favor of the project as long as the USACE takes the city's suggestions to heart.

Nigro said that the boardwalk peninsulas suggested by the city would be placed at the points of highest activity on the beach, as well as where concerts and volleyball tournaments traditionally take place. He added that uniformity along the beach of the placement of beach entrances and the height of the dune is necessary to maintain the beach as it is now. "If you don't have uniformity, you'll have major parking problems," said Nigro.

sub: The debate

The plan has inspired a range of opinions on the project. It has been widely lauded and roundly criticized, while some suggest adjusting the plan to include some aspects while leaving others out.

The proposed dune is the feature of the plan that is most often attacked. One of the most vocal opponents is former city councilwoman Barbara Mosca. Mosca, who served on the council from 1998-2001, has expressed her opposition to the project in the past and continues to object to the island-long dune. She believes that the revitalization of Long Beach's groins will be enough to secure a natural growth of the beach.

"When they put in the [current] stone jetties, the West End didn't have a beach," she said. "They just had a bulkhead, and then the beach grew" naturally after jetties were built.

Mosca doesn't believe that the city has been aggressive enough in securing the right plan for the city. "This is what makes Long Beach," Mosca said about the shoreline. "The city should be more proactive."

Should the project be completed, Mosca believes that more costs would arise that would further burden the city financially, such as security, construction costs and boardwalk safety. "It's like throwing money at something and watching it wash out to sea," said Mosca.

At least one of her former colleagues on the council shares those sentiments. "I'm not in favor of this plan," said Councilman Denis Kelly. "I would recommend against it." Kelly is opposed to the project due to what he believes would be a negative economic and aesthetic impact on the city and the beach.

Kelly, much like Mosca, thinks that there are too many costs that will arise that are not being discussed, such as maintenance and public safety. "The devil is in the details," he said.

Kelly also does not think the USACE has done an adequate job of keeping the city informed, and has been inconsistent with the information provided. "I've never believed they've been forthright with us," he said. "I've never felt comfortable with the information flow."

The councilman said that until the residents have been given all of the relevant information and spoken their minds, in his opinion, the plan cannot go forward.

sub: A needed shield?

Morris Kramer, an environmentalist who lives in Atlantic Beach, has championed a project such as this for over a decade. Kramer believes that the

only way the barrier island will be protected from a large hurricane will be for the dune to be built. Kramer said that when Hurricane Hugo hit the Carolinas in the 1980s, the communities without dunes suffered much greater damage and destruction than those with dune protection.

Some opponents of the project have argued that a natural dune landscape already exists beneath the boardwalk, but officials say it would not adequately protect every area that would be affected by a large-scale storm.

USACE officials say their proposed dune would protect the island from a Category 1 or 2 hurricane. Hurricane Gloria was a Category 1 when it struck Long Beach in 1985, causing significant West End flooding that led to the installation of the current protective dune. Category 2 hurricanes carry winds reaching 110 miles per hour and a storm surge of 6 to 8 feet above normal. According to Nigro, the barrier island has never been struck by a Category 2 hurricane or stronger.

Local flood insurance expert Denis A. Miller believes that the greatest storm damage threat to the island does not even come from hurricanes or tropical storms, but from nor'easters. "The worst floods have come from nor'easters, because they come in off the bay," Miller recently told the Herald. The USACE project would not prevent flooding of Reynolds Channel. According to Miller, the island's best-protected areas are actually those along the oceanfront, because the elevation is higher and the West End -- which has historically suffered the most damage from ocean storms -- is now protected by a dune, as is the extreme East End.

Miller also claims that Long Beach is further protected from hurricanes and storms on the ocean side of the island by Brooklyn's Seagate, which juts out into the ocean and absorbs much of a storm's brunt.

sub: Changing the landscape

Some have said that the boardwalk experience in Long Beach will be diminished by the presence of a massive dune in front of it. Concerts and volleyball on the beach will likely have to be moved, but Kramer believes that the good outweighs the bad.

"The boardwalk is going to be higher than the dune," he said. "The city can manage the height [of the dune]. Even if there is a little bit of change, do we take the chance of the destruction of an entire city?"

Councilman Lenny Remo believes that should the upcoming response from the USACE address all of the city's concerns adequately, the project will most likely go forward. Remo is confident that a dune stretching from the West End through Point Lookout will benefit the community greatly. "With the success of the dunes in the West End, as well the East End dunes, you need to continue the dune system," he said.

As for the difficulties arising from the addition of a city-long dune and the reconstruction of the boardwalk, Remo believes that the inconveniences are well worth the benefits. "You take a little bump in the road for a dryer city and dryer basements," he said.

Assemblyman Harvey Weisenberg (D-Long Beach) has been advocating a plan such as this for the past 15 years, and was instrumental in bringing state money into the project. "We have to do something to restore and revitalize the barrier beach," he said.

The former Long Beach lifeguard has seen what happens when storms hit the area -- and he has also seen the impact that storms nowhere near the island have on the beaches. "We had a storm last summer that was 500 miles away, and the water was under the boardwalk," he said. During the recent hurricane, water remained under the boardwalk at Grand Boulevard more than 36 hours after the storm passed. All the more reason, he says, to build an island-long protective dune.

Kramer believes that the many arguments against the project are easily refuted. While some officials have questioned the quality of sand that will be dredged from the ocean onto the beach, Kramer said he believes that the new sand will prove to be the same. Long Beach is known for having uniquely soft,

white sand. Many communities that have undertaken similar projects have seen the quality of their beach diminished by coarser sand or rocks and broken seashells.

Sciorra acknowledged that in areas where beach replenishment has taken place, the sand is sometimes a bit coarser, with a slightly larger grain. The difference between the sand, however, is so small that it would hardly be noticeable, let alone cause a problem, he claimed.

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Reader Opinions

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Name: Catherine Beagan

Date: Sep, 30 2003

Dear Editor,

How can this even be an option for our beloved city of Long Beach? Spend \$85 million of our taxpayers money for an ACOE plan that does NOT claim to protect the ENTIRE island? Mr. Sciorra has said to me personally -- and it even clearly states here in this piece -- that this plan will NOT protect the BAY side of Long Beach. This is a crucial element to any storm that heads in our direction. Also, the ACOE only claims to protect the barrier island from a category 2 storm and states that LB has "...never been struck by a Category 2 hurricane or stronger." So we're going to spend \$85 million initially and then more and more money every 5 years to "replenish" the beach for the NEXT 50 YEARS??? And it might work for cat 2 or lower?? Has anyone taken into account the fact that our beach is healthier than it's been in years -- replenishing itself????

These are just a FEW important facts to think about before we fund the ACOE's projects. I'm more than anxious to see what the ACOE states about the Piping Plover (the new environmental effects -- since this plan is from the mid 80s), when the PUBLIC HEARING will finally be scheduled -- and how the upcoming Elections will work this....

Sincerely,

Catherine Beagan

Respect the beach.

Number of Opinions: 1

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