

North Shore Erosion Task Force

November 3, 2014 9:30am

Clerks Conference Room, William H. Rogers Legislature Building, Hauppauge, NY

Jurisdiction: IR 2014-1697, Establishing a Suffolk County North Shore Coastal Erosion Task Force.

Next Meeting Date: January 2015, to be scheduled.

Members:

Legislator Sarah Anker, Chair

DeWitt Davies, Chief Environmental Analyst, Suffolk County Planning

Gil Anderson, Commissioner, Suffolk County Department of Public Works

Paul TeNyenhuis, District Manager, Suffolk County Soil and Water

Polly Weigand, Technician, Suffolk County Soil and Water

Adam Santiago, U.S. Congressman Tim Bishop

Eric Star, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation

Jay Tanski, Coastal Processes and Facilities Specialist, New York Sea Grant

Henry Bokuniewicz, Professor, Stony Brook University School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences

Introduction: As Chair of the North Shore Coastal Erosion Task Force, Legislator Anker began the meeting by establishing that the North Shore of Suffolk County requires additional attention in regards to erosion. The effects of Superstorm Sandy and Hurricane Irene have impacted the infrastructure and environmental stability of Suffolk County's North Shore.

Eric Star of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) mentioned that one of the challenges the North Shore faces is the protection of private property. As with many erosion cases on the South Shore, the Federal government has stepped in to protect public property, buying land to protect the Great South Bay. The North Shore tends to be mainly private properties and homes. The Army Corps of Engineers has two areas that are of interest in Suffolk County, which include Asharoken and Southold. These areas are being studied because the Federal government may have interest in repairing those areas to build resiliency. This rebuilding comes with a cost sharing component, as mentioned by Adam Santiago of Congressman Bishop's office. Mr. Santiago noted that Army Corps projects need a sponsor and in many instances the county will partner as the sponsor.

Legislator Anker inquired as to the possibility of creating coastal erosion maps to illustrate areas of high priority. She mentioned that scientific data and future projections of the coastline are necessary to understanding preventative measures. In response to Legislator Anker's question, Mr. Star explained that the NYSDEC is currently in the process of re-mapping coastal erosion. Coastal erosion maps exist from the 1980s but the landscape has changed since that time. The maps will be used as jurisdiction for the bulkhead permitting process (Article 34, NYS Environmental Law). The North Shore maps are expected to be completed before the South Shore maps. The new maps will also show recession rate.

Legislator Anker questioned whether vegetation is a viable option to prevent erosion along North Shore bluff. Professor Bokuniewicz explained that undercutting during storms will remove the vegetation. Jay Tanski of New York Sea Grant also mentioned that plants cannot withstand storm waves if the fetch is too large, so for areas with high wave energy, vegetation is not recommended, pointing out that wave energy is a major contributing factor to coastal erosion.

The Task Force went on to discuss the ways in which preventing erosion can be very costly to the homeowner, and Mr. Star reminded the group that the cost of repairing a bulkhead can be more expensive than the cost of the home itself. DeWitt Davies of Suffolk County Planning said that many of the bluffs along the North Shore of Suffolk County are approximately 100 feet tall and a massive, very costly structure would be necessary to protect cliffs of that size. Mr. Star suggested educating homeowners of the importance of insuring their homes.

Mr. Santiago advised steering homeowners with insurance questions to the New York State Department of Finance, as the department assisted Long Islanders with the August 12th and August 13th flooding. Mr. Santiago reminded the group that the response to every disaster starts local and ends local and that a Federal Declaration of Disaster will not happen overnight, but still must be made.

Legislator Anker asked Mr. Star to briefly explain the NYSDEC's process of issuing bulkhead permits and why the process can be lengthy. She reminded the task force that time is very limited in some cases and that while residents wait to receive their permits, they may be forced to implement their own methods to protect their homes. Mr. Star mentioned that in issuing the permits, the NYSDEC considers whether the resident can move their property back and whether the bluff is actually eroding. Mr. Star mentioned that while the North Shore is comprised of privately owned lots, the homeowners may not actually own the toe and structures built without permits can unintentionally damage neighboring properties. Paul TeNyenhuis of the Suffolk County Soil and Water Conservation District mentioned that some Suffolk County townships, such as the Town of Smithtown and Town of Southold do not allow bulkheads for this reason. Mr. Santiago recommended the group create a menu showing pros and cons of erosion prevention methods, but Mr. Star advised that the NYSDEC does not design projects for residents as there are liability issues that could arise. He also mentioned that the NYSDEC has erosion prevention for homeowners on its website.

Mr. Santiago asked whether the county's GIS specialists can create a map of North Shore coastal erosion, in the interim of the NYSDEC maps being completed. Mr. Davies said that he may be able to work with cartographers at the county to create maps. Gil Anderson agreed, noting that the size of the area being mapped may make the task more difficult, but that the mapping could indeed be done. Legislator Anker mentioned that she would like to see if the maps from the NYSDEC could be expedited. Mr. Star advised that the maps are product of the state, under Joseph Martens, Commissioner of the NYSDEC. Mr. Star also noted that the website www.historicaerials.com is a very good reference as well.

In response to Legislator Anker's request for maps, Polly Weigand of the Suffolk County Soil and Water Conservation District also added that Suffolk County Soil and Water Conservation District has historical maps and that the department could assist in completing new maps. Mr. TeNyenhuis informed the task force that Soil and Water completed a study in the 1960's to show soil loss. This study showed that there could be a loss 2 feet per year prior to sea level rise which has undoubtedly occurred. However, the department may need some personnel assistance. Legislator Anker requested that Soil and Water work in cooperation with Stony Brook University to find capable graduate students to assist in the mapping.

Conclusion:

Legislator Anker noted that at the very least, the North Shore Erosion Task Force can provide erosion maps to raise awareness and show that this issue requires immediate attention. She also announced that she would like for the task force to provide a community forum, possibly in the summer or fall of 2015, to provide residents with the findings of the task force. Mr. Tanski mentioned that his office has a packet for homeowners regarding Low Cost Share Prevention shared a Sea Grant funded brochure, created to educate South Shore residents about the coastal landscape, which Ms. Weigand noted was a helpful resource. Legislator Anker suggested that a similar brochure be created for North Shore residents and tasked Mr. Tanski and Ms. Weigand with finding the cost of a brochure for the North Shore and requested that Mr. Tanski provide the members of the task force with information for Low Cost Share Prevention.