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Carper sees economic need to rebuild Mispillion jetty

Town officials say Slaughter Beach is at risk without work; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers says other projects have priority

BY PATRICIA V. RIVERA
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When Hickman Rowland opened his water taxi business in 1973, the tall Mispillion jetty towered along the mouth of the bay, stabilizing the inlet, protecting the harbor.

Over the years, however, the jetty started to fall and eventually crumbled. In the winter, when fierce northwest winds blow water from the Delaware Bay into the Atlantic Ocean, the fleet in his Delaware Bay Launch Service runs into the sand too often.

"In those times, we can't operate our business. We lose an hour or two waiting," he said. That means his clients, mostly oil tankers traveling north, must wait for higher waters to receive needed equipment or personnel.

His is just one problem highlighted Friday at a meeting organized by Slaughter Beach officials with the hopes of garnering more support to fix the jetty.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completed the structure in 1930, creating a funnel of sorts to help water drain into the Delaware Bay from the Cedar Creek and the Mispillion River.

"The jetty was well-maintained and restricted the incoming and outgoing tides," Mayor Frank S. Draper said.

The wall gradually broke down over the years, particularly in the northernmost portion of the southern jetty. The state rebuilt part of the northern wall some 20 years ago.

Draper said the conditions create a navigational hazard with rotted piling covered at half tide. And Slaughter Beach is constantly under the threat of "back bay flooding."

"When we have a prolonged period of wind out of the east, the demise of the jetty allows more water to back up into the marshes on any given tide cycle," he said.

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Sen. Tom Carper (left) talks to Glenn Gauvry and Mariko Sai before a tour Friday of the Mispillion jetty with Slaughter Beach residents and officials.

On Friday, Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., toured the area near the jetty. He recognized the problems aren't new and that it would be costly to mend. Replacing the jetty could cost as much as \$30 million.

The Corps of Engineers said other major projects will take priority over this one, though they have made a \$430,000 request for dredging. The corps last dredged there in 2002.

Carper said the jetty needs a long-term fix. He sees the problem as one with national implications. He said delays involving oil tankers are costly and companies may pass the expense to consumers.

"Residents could argue the possibility of further spikes in gasoline," he said.

An environmental appeal involves the reduction of the endangered horseshoe crabs.

Horseshoe crabs, shorebirds and other waterfowl use the area adjacent to the south side of the jetty as shelter. Nowadays, the havens offer less protection.

"I see real concerns," Carper said. "They could easily offer an economic rational or an environmental one -- or they could do both."

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