

## **Broken seawall prompts state to assess home values in Sea Breeze**

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FAIRFIELD TOWNSHIP - As the Delaware Bay battered Sea Breeze's deteriorating year-old seawall, state officials quietly sent two independent appraisers to assess home values in this isolated community.

The Department of Environmental Protection has not yet offered to buy out the remaining 19 homeowners at Sea Breeze, but if it does, it will have support. Township officials and environmentalists now advocate a buyout, just 18 months after the construction of a \$1.8 million seawall intended to hold back the bay.

"I know DEP said to me they would be in favor of buying out the residents at fair market value," Mayor Marion Kennedy Jr. said Wednesday. "Personally, I'd like to see them take the buyout."

DEP spokeswoman Elaine Makatura said no dollar figures have been discussed and no offers made. Two Sea Breeze homeowners said they heard nothing of offers after appraisers visited their homes three months ago.

"The wall isn't in the same shape it was in when constructed," Makatura said. "Being aware of that, the DEP had an appraiser go out to evaluate some of the properties there."

Storms have battered the seawall since its construction, transforming what was supposed to be a flat, sloped wall into a rippling jumble of displaced stones in a wall that has lost most of its integrity.

Original plans called for paving Beach Avenue, the road that divides the homes from the seawall and the bay, but that never happened. Cost overruns also prevented the construction of a boat launch and a clearing of a narrow beach that is currently littered with stone remnants of makeshift bulkheads that once protected the homes. The project cost nearly twice the \$1 million originally estimated. Most have deemed it a failure.

"The DEP and the public threw a lot of money at this seawall and it has failed to work," said Matt Blake of the American Littoral Society.

Blake is part of a growing chorus calling for the community to be abandoned. The area is bounded mostly by marshes, with farmland beyond it. Those marshes are prime nesting grounds for horseshoe crabs, the populations of which have been sharply depleted in recent years. Blake believes the land should be allowed to return to its natural state to not only protect wildlife but serve as a better spot for public recreation.

Some homeowners would consider a buyout for the right price, while others might not.

Township Committeeman Mickey Lloyd said the DEP assessed the properties at \$6 million, but Makatura and Kennedy disputed that, saying it was incorrect. Still, the surprise of hearing a figure - even one that may prove to be incorrect - prompted consideration from at least one homeowner.

"I would like to see that in writing," said Joe Hepner, who owns Sea Breeze's southernmost home. "I think we would consider it."

Sea Breeze sits in the southwest corner of New Jersey, and the houses are literally within throwing distance of the bay. A stream and marshes are situated behind the homes, leaving most surrounded by water. One road leads into the community, and it floods during routine rains. Storms send surges up the shore and past the homes.

The community was once a recreational mecca, one of several Delaware Bayshore communities to draw vacationers from Philadelphia and New Jersey.

Most of those communities have fallen on hard times or disappeared due to erosion and storms. Thompsons and Moores beaches, just east of the Maurice River, were abandoned in the 1990s, with many property owners bought out by the state. Fortescue, Money Island and Gandys Beach, similar communities in Downe Township, continue to thrive.

Former Mayor Craig Thomas, now an outgoing township committeeman, saw the potential to renew Sea Breeze's glory days when he championed the construction of a seawall to protect the community. After gaining an influential patron in state Sen. Steve Sweeney, D-Gloucester, Cumberland and Salem, Thomas won DEP matching funds for the work.

A Sea Breeze homeowners association on Tuesday proposed creating a redevelopment zone here to direct their tax revenues directly to repairing the wall. Kennedy said he would run the idea past area government leaders to gauge their reactions to it, but made no commitment of his own to the idea. He said DEP support would still be needed.

Meanwhile, the Fairfield Taxpayers Association urged township leaders to file a complaint against the engineer who designed the wall. Kennedy called their move "a witch hunt."

Donald Nogowski, an attorney for the Sea Breeze homeowners, said the DEP could find the money to help the community, considering how much it spends to protect Atlantic shorelines in New Jersey.

"They can choose where to fight Mother Nature," Nogowski said. "They can choose where to spend their money. There are barrier islands along the (Atlantic) coast where they spend far more money."

E-mail Daniel Walsh:

[DWalsh@pressofac.com](mailto:DWalsh@pressofac.com)

Facts about Seabreeze

- Steamboats regularly traveled from Philadelphia to Sea Breeze in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to frequent Sea Breeze's amusement pier.
- Sea Breeze had at least two hotels at different times. The Warner House and The Seabreeze Hotel both burned down in fires.
- A local tavern remained open here until Hurricane Gloria wrecked it in 1985. The building's remnants still stand along the bay.
- Locals and government officials typically spell the name of the village "Seabreeze". Its official spelling, however, is "Sea Breeze".