

Gandys Beach residents fear DEP will not let them save their homes

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DOWNE TOWNSHIP - At high tide, the water rushes in beneath the houses here on Gandys Beach.

It flows between the stilts, over the foundation and leaves water marks on the wood piling.

Ten to 15 years ago, the Delaware Bay didn't get this close.

But now, the sea grass that lined the back of these homes is gone. The sand level is more than two feet lower when measured at some houses. What used to be small rising dunes is now a descending beach.

"This type of grass used to be out back there," said Barry Oglesby, a longtime summer resident here. "Over the last several years, the water has come closer and closer. It's taken the grass. We're trying to build a bulkhead."

Oglesby and the three other homeowners hoping to pay for the bulkhead's construction aren't too optimistic, however. They retained Hopewell-based Fralinger Engineering to start design work, but then spoke with government officials, who informally told them that the bulkhead permits likely would not get approved.

"We haven't given up, but we're not as optimistic as we used to be," Oglesby said.

A state Department of Environmental Protection spokesman said the agency wasn't familiar with the case, and the residents say nothing is official yet.

Still, the situation appears to parallel what's becoming a more prevalent debate in the few waterfront communities left in Cumberland County: The waters are rising, the marshes and beaches are retreating beneath them, and these houses stand in their way.

Some say it doesn't make sense to keep building makeshift bulkheads to protect these homes against the inevitable rising tide.

"When you draw that kind of a line in the sand, under the scenario of climate change and sea level rise, you're going to be eroding beach," said Matt Blake, a program manager with the American Littoral Society who's familiar with Gandys Beach. "When you put that line in the sand, it prevents the long-term survival of the beach."

Recent studies, such as one released in July by the University of Maryland's Center for Integrative Environmental Research, say New Jersey coastlines such as those on the Delaware Bay could see up to 3 percent of their shores covered in water by the next century.

Neighbors don't need to read scientific studies to know the waters are rising, however.

"At high tide, there is no beach here," said Gary King Jr., a Pennsylvania native who spends weekends in the house next door to Oglesby.

Erosion and bay intrusion have already wiped out several bayfront communities, such as Thompsons and Moores beaches in Maurice River Township. Those small villages are now nothing but empty marshes and archaeological remains of towns lost to the bay. The state government bought out many residents there rather than build walls against the bay.

Farther northwest along the bay, the state and Fairfield Township spent more than \$1 million to build a seawall to protect about a dozen homes remaining at Sea Breeze, but that wall has been so battered by storms that some question its effectiveness.

The marshes and beaches are prime stopover grounds for migratory birds and breeding spots for the horseshoe crabs that provide those birds with food. Groups like the Littoral Society wonder whether it might be best to stop trying to protect these homes so the beaches can retreat naturally, providing habitat for crabs and birds such as the red knot, which have become scarcer in recent years.

"I've seen the houses on these stilts, and I can tell you I've seen the horseshoe crabs and migratory birds beneath them," Blake said. "What's the cumulative impact of homeowners creating more sea walls and rip rap when the sea level is expected to rise several feet in the next century?"

Right now, few claim to be sure, but the homeowners would like to keep their homes.

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