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Hearing points out LBI's storm vulnerability

By ZACH PATBERG Staff Writer, (609) 978-2010

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DOVER TOWNSHIP — A coastal geologist told the state Senate Environment Comm-ittee on Friday that Long Beach Island was the section of the New Jersey shore "most vulnerable" to hurricanes and severe storms and that a replenishment project should begin immediately to protect it.

Stewart Farrell, director of the Coastal Research Center at Stockton College, said the narrowness of the 18-mile island coupled with some flimsy artificial dunes distinguished the island as especially at risk of being washed over if hit with a series of northeasters.

"The LBI replenishment should start tomorrow, that's how serious it is," he said at the committee public hearing that focused on beach erosion as well as fisheries management.

Farrell's dire forecast came as the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers awaits answers to bid advertisements it sent out July 21 to begin pumping sand onto Surf City's beaches — the first phase of an overall \$71 million replenishment project covering most of the island. Prospective contractors have to send in bids by Aug. 22. The corps hopes to begin the Surf City project in September. Despite not having collected 100 percent of the borough's easements, federal and state officials say only two-thirds are needed to begin bid advertising and the 100 percent of the easements are required only in the section where work has begun.

Farrell cited Ocean City as an example of the benefits of the replenishment method. After a "perfect storm" hit there on Halloween 1991, he said, the Boardwalk was damaged, causing \$4 million in repairs. In December 1992, after a replenishment project had been completed, a bigger storm hit, yet this time the Boardwalk remained undamaged, according to the scientist.

As for Long Beach Island, Farrell said if a storm such as that hit, "dollars per mile in damages will be staggering."

While sharing Farrell's view on the island's vulnerability, Norbert Psuty, of the Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences at Rutgers University, was more hesitant about rushing into a project that he saw as environmentally obtrusive.

"Replenishment is a reasonable way to fix erosion, but first you have to find a way to secure the beaches in the least environmentally damaging way," Psuty, who also testified at the hearing, said afterward. "I don't think they've considered that."

Psuty was not alone in his concerns Monday, with several environmentalists testifying to the committee that drawing sand from the ocean floor to dump onto the beach would drastically injure some marine life habitats.

Still others at the hearing in the Dover Township municipal building saw the solution to beach erosion was not so much in replenishing but in curbing shorefront overdevelopment.

A news release from the American Littoral Society, a coastal conservation group, called replenishment projects "a quick fix," saying the real symptom of erosion was "unwise development and high-hazard areas."

And Douglas O'Malley, field director for the New Jersey Public Interest Research Group, testified that "developers are loving the shore to death."

Most in attendance Friday, while perhaps critical of the replenishment project's design, nevertheless tended to favor its concept, including the few beachfront homeowners present who have refused to sign over easements.

Peter Reinhart, chairman of Jersey Shore Partnership, Inc., pointed to the economic benefits of drawing tourism as reason enough for strengthening the shoreline.

"Our residents who live on and near the shore, and those who visit the shore, and those whose livelihood depends on the tourists who flock to the shore — and frankly, our state coffers that receive significant dollars from the Jersey Shore tourism industry — need our beaches," he said.

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