

Retreat, not replenish, may be best option

Beachfills a losing battle and money may dry up, scientist argues

By JACK FICHTER
Cape May Star and Wave



Jack Fichter/CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE

Dunes at Poverty Beach in Cape May are reinforced with sand fencing to help protect the homes and city infrastructure.

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Coastal towns should not stake their future on continuing beach replenishment from the federal government, says A.R. Siders, an Environmental Fellow at the Harvard University Center for the Environment.

Her research focuses on climate change adaptation governance, exploring how institutional and social structures affect decisions around adaptation policies and how those policies affect social justice and risk reduction outcomes. She combines approaches from hazards geography, sociology, law, digital humanities and computational social science. Siders also collaborates with consulting companies and nonprofit organizations to integrate climate change adaptation into disaster risk reduction and resilience efforts.

She has suggested local municipalities should pay a higher percentage of the cost of beach replenishment and as such, may pass stricter zoning requirements. Siders has also endorsed managed retreat in some cases, a process in which the government buys and demolishes properties subject to repeated flooding. New Jersey will purchase vulnerable homes under the Blue Acres program.

"I don't see beach replenishment as a permanent solution," Siders said. "By its very nature, it's temporary, we put the sand on and then it drifts away."

She said finding new sources of sand disrupts the ecosystem routinely. Siders said the environmental effects of beach replenishment are not

entirely clear.

"Long term looking at our fiscal situation, it's not clear to me that the taxpayers are going to want to forever continue to pay for an ongoing beach nourishment even for a place as historic and important as Cape May," she said.

Siders recommended Cape May explore other solutions to keep its beaches large enough. She said much of her research centers on communities pulling back from the ocean.

She said naturally, beaches ebb and flow.

"Only because we've put homes and buildings on them that are permanent that we can't let the beach do that," Siders said.

In some municipalities, being able to relocate back from the ocean even 300 feet gives the beach room to regrow inland and not need to be replenished in the same manner. She said that is a challenge for towns with historic buildings.

"I think we're going to see a lot more communities need to shift inland in order to allow

the beach to also shift inland with rising seas," Siders said.

She said the classic solutions to deal with sea level rise is to build a wall, to do some type of living shoreline with dunes, to elevate homes or relocate homes and buildings away from the shoreline.

"The reality is none of them is ideal," Siders said.

She said there is a general prediction in the future there will be less and less federal support for beach replenishment. Siders noted the Trump administration is seeking to reduce costs.

"I think it's a great idea that a community should try to develop plans that allow them more ownership of the process as well and that can require them funding more of it, but it also means that they get more of a say in how things are done and what options are used in their community," she said. "If the federal government is footing the bill, then the federal government also gets a lot of say over what is done and how it is done. There's that trade off there."

Siders said reform is taking place in the federal flood insurance program and is likely to also take place in disaster relief, particularly in not allowing repetitive losses.

"Fighting against the ocean is about as useful as shaking your fist at a nor'easter," she said. "Sometimes you have to let nature take its course and let it find its own solution."

Siders said Cape May needs to consider how it wants the town to look in 30 to 50 years, "recognizing looking like it did 30 years ago is not an option."

"Do we want big concrete seawalls in front our homes, right up against the shore?" she asked.

Should a town invest in beach replenishment, no matter how expensive, or at some level start edging away or stop developing on the beach and putting in new infrastructure that will make it eventually harder to relocate away from the ocean?, Siders asked.

She said a number of coastal towns will experience flooding in the future. Even if it's not catastrophic, roads will be flooded, businesses affected and basements flooded.

"If we do nothing, nature will continue to change and it will sort of make our choices for us, unless we start proactively planning for it," Siders said.

Some cities are raising funds to undertake mitigation programs such as raising sales tax or imposing storm-water fees on sewer bills, she said. A line item can be placed in a municipal budget for projects to deal with sea level rise, Siders said.

On the topic of climate change, Siders said the longer

we delay taking action, the harder it will be to remediate and fewer options will remain.

"Taking action now is extremely important," she said. Siders said we are "locked in," we will experience the effects of climate change for decades to come based purely on what has already taken place, "even if we all went

cold turkey tomorrow."

In the future, trying to keep up with sea level rise by beach replenishment may not be the best option.

"Personally, at some point, I think it's going to be so expensive and so problematic trying to keep up with sea level rise, I can't see it being a continually attractive option," Siders said.

Confirm beach replenishment

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said.

The city would also like to schedule a meeting with U.S. Rep. Jeff Van Drew in May, she said. DeSatnick said the city took a list of questions to Van Drew at a previous meeting.

"Never before has there been a funding issue where beach replenishment was 'put off,'" Cape May Beach Patrol Capt. Geoff Rife said.

He expressed concerns if the fall beach replenishment were canceled, would the Army Corps also not have funding for the next sand replacement in two years.

"As a community, we have to think about making sure that our coastline and our beaches are ready for our tourists during that season," Rife said. "There also has to be taken into account the fact that if left unchecked and there is no beach replenishment at Wilmington Avenue and storms come or something occurs and that gets eaten away, we now have a public safety issue on our hands with the potential of seawater flooding part of the east end of town."

He said the city in the past never had to pursue the Army Corps, Cape May simply received beach replenishment every two years.

Rife said pipes from the dredge would be in the ocean during hurricane season.

DeSatnick said Mother Nature was very kind to Cape May last year, with few storms and no breaching of dunes. He said he stood on the beach at Wilmington Avenue in January and saw the ocean only about 20 yards from the seawall.

The city has been able to knock down scarps in the beach's surf zone following

storms. A scarp is a line of cliffs produced by faulting or erosion, or a low steep slope along a beach caused by wave erosion. Sharp drop-offs in the surf zone have been blamed for injuries to swimmers under rough surf conditions.

The city had a Beach Maintenance Permit from the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) allowing it to remove scarps on the beach with a bulldozer.

Due to a DEP perception of piping plover nests on the beach, the city cannot knock down scarps from Baltimore to Wilmington avenues. DeSatnick said when a scarp is knocked down, in the next two to six tides, Mother Nature flattens out the area. He said an area of concern is Poverty Beach.

Rife said in areas of the beach where scarps cannot be addressed, it took Mother Nature eight days to remove the drop off.

"Eight days is not a long time unless you're looking at the 100 days of summer," he said. "Then all of a sudden, you're looking at a potential of one-tenth of the summer, where we have a situation that can be taken care of in 36 hours."

He said the city just needs permission from the DEP to

knock down the scarp in the surf zone from Baltimore to Wilmington avenues.

A public address (PA) system to make emergency announcements to beachgoers has been installed from the cove beach to Ocean Street. DeSatnick said Metro

Sound Pros would be returning to Cape May next week to evaluate completing the PA system to Poverty Beach.

Rife asked the city to declare May 20-27 as Beach Safety Week, which would be acknowledged at a City Council meeting.

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