

Jetty Attack



Juan Trippe's Jetty Needs To Be Tapered Before It's Too Late

*By Gary Ireland, Roy Scheider
and Robert DeLuca*

This month the Southampton Town Board and the Southampton Trustees filed a much-welcomed lawsuit intended to force Suffolk County to remove groins (commonly known as jetties) located at Georgica Pond in East Hampton and provide promised sand replenishment to the eroded beaches.

We applaud the Board and Trustees for this bold move and their commitment to saving our pristine yet rapidly eroding beaches from the damage caused by the stone groins. At the same time, we strongly encourage Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy to take a lead in forging an arrangement to eliminate the damage caused by the ill-conceived groins and provide desperately needed sand to address the man-made coastal erosion problem that has spanned more than two generations.



This government debacle, costing millions of taxpayer dollars to construct and widely considered responsible for hundreds of millions of dollars in property damage, is a nightmare worthy of a “60 Minutes” investigative story. In the early 1960s Suffolk County, along with the federal and state governmental agencies, embarked on a project designed to save the South Fork’s ocean beaches by nourishing them with a total of about 34 million cubic yards of sand.

Unfortunately, without explanation, the plan was apparently scrapped when the owner of Pan American Airlines, Juan Trippe, requested that two groins be built in front of his oceanfront estates in the Georgica Pond section of East Hampton. Prior to the construction of the Suffolk County Groins, it was widely known by the government that the groins would only protect a few East Hampton estates and that they would result in the wide scale destruction of the public beaches downdrift.

This projected devastation was even reported before the Suffolk County Groins were even constructed. An Army Corps report from 1964 confirmed that the groins “will result in erosion of the downdrift beach to the west of the groin field. . . . This could result in damage suits. . .” Suffolk County even adopted resolutions agreeing to offset the known erosion, promising to nourish the depleted downdrift beaches with sand.

Despite the risks, and with full knowledge of the effects, Suffolk County built a set of groins that would protect a few estates at the long-term expense of miles of public beaches to their west.

As predicted, shortly after this construction, beaches and dunes that took nature thousands of years to create were nearly destroyed in a few short years. Many local public beaches have been rendered unusable and continue to suffer severe erosion today.

Most recently, this accelerated erosion has severely damaged the public beaches at Town Line Road, Peter's Pond Road, Gibson Road, Sagaponack Main, Ocean Road, Jobs Lane and Mecox, beaches that formerly provided summer recreation to thousands of visitors each year.

In addition, on Fairfield Pond Lane in Sagaponack, the ocean laps at a fragile and ever narrowing dune and threatens to breach through to a fresh water pond. The homes along Fairfield Pond are now so close to the ocean that Southampton Town Supervisor Skip Heaney declared a state of emergency, permitting the oceanfront homeowners to shore up their depleting dunes.

The devastation caused by the Suffolk County Groins is nothing new in Sagaponack. In fact, on Potato Road the beaches are constantly in an unofficial state of emergency. The home of Cynthia Hamlin Ireland, a cottage that survived the infamous 1938 hurricane, has been moved twice and two of the nine homes on the road have been swallowed by the sea since the installation the County groins.

Homeowners on the western edge of Southampton, in the village of West Hampton Dunes, consider beachgoers in Sagaponack to be lucky. Groins built on their stretch of beach are widely thought to be responsible for a breach into the bay and the destruction of nearly 200 homes in the early 1990s. No one from

Suffolk County, the Army Corps, or the state has ever offered any explanation why they knowingly destroyed our beaches and homes!

Despite resolutions and promises, Suffolk County has done nothing to offset the massive destruction caused by their groins. It is widely believed that the government has already spent more in the cost of studies and litigation involving the groins than it would cost to fix the problem with sand replenishment and removal of the structures.

Today, Suffolk County's new Executive, Steve Levy speaks loudly and frequently about the need for beach nourishment and strongly acknowledges the damaging effects of jetties and groins. In fact, his position paper on erosion calls for the County to "shorten all groins under its control." Executive Levy further admits, "Recent studies clearly indicate that . . . groins [and] jetties . . . create critical and expensive problems on the coast. They often grab sand on their updrift sides to the detriment of downdrift property owners. . . [resulting in] intense liability problems for all."

Last spring, appearing before the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works with Senator Hillary Clinton, Levy reiterated his position supporting beach nourishment, noting that, ". . . we cannot simply walk away from our commitments." Unfortunately, he has done just that by failing to take action.

In this age when government officials appropriately demand that citizens take personal responsibility for the protection of our natural resources, we strongly urge County Executive Levy to lead our region's coastal policy by example.

If Mr. Levy were to take up the issue of Suffolk County's historic failure to properly manage our invaluable coastline, and restore the beaches that his predecessors destroyed, the environmental legacy of his administration would be unparalleled indeed.

Dan's Papers .com

DAN'S PAPERS the week of November 26, 2004