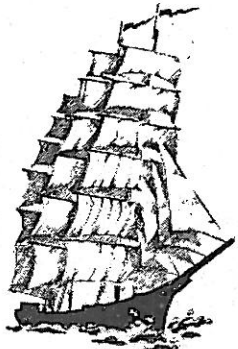


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State to assist Plum Island sand deposits

BY VICTOR TINE
STAFF WRITER

PLUM ISLAND — Help appears to be on the way for the area's troubled beaches after an Army Corps of Engineers report ratcheted up a sense of urgency to resolve the erosion problem.

A state agency agreed

yesterday to provide partial funding for a long-sought beach replenishment project. Meanwhile, the area's congressman urged the head of the Army Corps of Engineers to ensure that work "can begin as soon as practicable."

The report compiled by the Army Corps projects Plum Island

Beach Center is losing about 13 feet of beach per year, threatening as many as 26 homes over the next decade.

Congressman John Tierney of Salem wrote to Lt. Gen. Robert Van Antwerp shortly after the House passed President Barack Obama's economic stimulus package, calling for the Army Corps

to assign high priority to three Essex County projects, including Plum Island and Salisbury.

Under a plan outlined yesterday by the state Department of Conservation and Recreation, sand dredged from the Merrimack River channel would be

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SAND: State to pay 75 percent of non-federal funds

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deposited directly onto the beach at Plum Island Center and in Salisbury.

DCR Deputy Chief Engineer Raul Silva said his agency would provide 75 percent of the non-federal matching funds needed to cover the additional cost of dumping the sand on shore, rather than the usual practice of offshore deposit.

Silva presented the plan yesterday to the Merrimack River Beach Alliance, a group of local and state officials, as well as organizations, such as Plum Island Taxpayers and Associates, the Plum Island Foundation and the Salisbury Beach Betterment Association.

There is an estimated 160,000 cubic yards of dredge material in the Merrimack River channel, according to the Army Corps of Engineers. Under the DCR proposal, Plum Island would receive 120,000 yards and Salisbury Beach 40,000.

State Sen. Bruce Tarr, who is

also Beach Alliance co-chairman, said at the meeting that anyone with objections to the division of the sand should speak up.

"This is like a wedding: Speak now or forever hold your peace," Tarr said.

There was no audible dissent, and a later show of hands on the proposal appeared to be unanimous; although the alliance has no specific voting procedure but rather works by consensus.

One of the meeting's participants, Annapolis Way resident and Plum Island Foundation Vice President Robert Connors, had previously threatened a lawsuit to block deposit of sand anywhere but the island, but he did not object yesterday.

Salisbury Town Manager Neil Harrington also had no objection.

"The split seems fair to me," Harrington said.

The plan presented by Silva would leave Newbury, Newburyport and Salisbury with a combined \$175,000 to raise to

The plan presented by Silva would leave Newbury, Newburyport and Salisbury with a combined \$175,000 to raise to complete the funding for the project.

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DCR would provide about \$525,000 and take care of local and state permitting for the project.

Dredging the channel, which would be done entirely at federal government expense, has been estimated at \$2.1 million.

Depositing the sand on shore would add another approximately \$2 million, depending on the method used. The federal government would pay 65 percent of that additional cost.

The remaining 35 percent

— about \$700,000 — must be made up of non-federal money. Silva said DCR is willing to pick up 75 percent of that figure.

Tarr said the alliance would work to get the Newbury-Newburyport-Salisbury share paid from other sources of money, which have yet to be identified.

Silva said the dredged-sand deposit is only a temporary solution, but it buys time until a long-range plan is in place.

"The 160 (thousand cubic yards of sand) is a Band-Aid, but it's a big Band-Aid," he said.

Silva said he expected the Army Corps to go out to bid on a dredging contract late in the summer, which means the dredging would take place late this year or early 2010.

Newburyport and Newbury need to complete beach management plans in the next few months to expedite permitting, he said. DCR itself owns all of Salisbury Beach and has completed a beach management plan for that stretch of shoreline.

Change of fortune



JIM VAIKNORAS/Staff photo

One of several new homes under construction along Northern Boulevard in Plum Island, even as the economy and housing markets continue to sag.

Once-humble summer retreat drawing a millionaire crowd

BY KATIE CURLEY
STAFF WRITER

PLUM ISLAND — There's a boatload of theories on exactly when it started, and who caused it.

You can point to Montel Williams. Or Fortune Magazine. Or Jeanne Geiger, wife of Aeropostale founder Julian Geiger. Or something as unglamorous as water and sewer service. Or maybe it was just word of mouth.

Whatever the cause, the effect is clear. Plum Island, once a relaxed cluster of humble summer cottages and neighborhood stores, is being remade into a year-round retreat of multi-million-dollar homes and upscale businesses.

And even as residents and officials struggle to contain beach erosion that threatens to split the island in half, the lure of the island continues to draw big investments.

Take a walk down the island's main road, Northern Boulevard, and the air is often filled with the sound of hammers, heavy construction equipment and lumber trucks. The economy may be on the brink of recession, but on Plum Island, mini-mansions with ocean views soar up on tiny lots.

The change has been stark, particularly for longtime islanders.

"There used to only be 100 people who lived here year round; now 80 percent live year round," said Ron Barrett, who has been a year-round islander since the 1970s. "People in the 1970s barely made it; it was just shacks. Now, they are all beautiful homes."

"The island really changed because life goes on, it's a progression," lifelong resident and Port Property Real Estate agent Barbara Kezer of 78th Street said.

"Most of the island was fishermen or retired people (when I was young). Ten

percent lived year round; the other 90 percent were affluent and came for the summer," Kezer, 69, remembered.

Plum Island was largely laid out in the 1920s by a real estate company that marketed a simple but attractive idea — a healthy, family-friendly and affordable place to own a cottage "almost at the very threshold of Boston." A 1920s promotional flier described the island as "unspoiled" and protected against "the cheaper types of amusement enterprises."

Small cottages popped up by the hundreds on the 70-foot by 70-foot lots that form a grid on much of the island.

Kezer and Barrett agree the Plum Island of yesteryear had a different feel — professionals, like doctors or lawyers, sent their families to the island for six weeks during the summer. There was a

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CHANGES: One-time family-friendly res

■ *Continued from Page 1*

summertime crowd that got to know one another. Kids raced from house to house. Little businesses that catered to cottagers sprung up.

"It was such a nice environment," Kezer said. "There was never a lack of things to do because there were restaurants, fishing boats, even a ballroom, which was turned into a roller rink."

Vacationers huddled into the Lighthouse Grill or the Leonardo for supper, and fishing boats could be heard reeling in their catch throughout the night. Kezer, who grew up on Nancy Street, said the island was always a place for families rather than celebrities.

"Though I once delivered bait to Patti Paige, and Ted Williams used to fish there, the island was for families. Salisbury Beach is where the celebrities would stay and perform," Kezer said.

Barrett said the island's affordability was always a draw for the affluent, especially in the 1970s and 1980s.

"In the '70s and '80s it was cheap and the only reasonable oceanfront property. You would have million-dollar homes for \$350,000," Barrett said. "At the same time, homes on Wingaersheek Beach were \$950,000. Same beach, ours just moves a little."

In 1995, the island's first major

celebrity bought property. It was Montel Williams, then a rising star on the talk show circuit.

His wife's family owned what was then Walton's Ocean Front hotel on Fordham Way. In a 1995 interview, Ann Lee Walton noted why Williams was drawn to the island: "This is a low-key area, and the people are real people. In Newburyport and Plum Island, people don't put on airs. That's one of the things Montel said."

He planned an elaborate compound a block or so from the hotel — a plan some still remember for its attention to extravagant detail, such as a driveway wide enough for stretch limousine to turn around in.

Williams decided not to build, but others with money to invest came.

Fortunes change

Many current residents pinpoint a 2002 Fortune Magazine article as the moment the tides turned on the island.

The article listed Plum Island as a "Fantasy Island," alongside Nantucket and Block Island as a place "on the verge of becoming a luxury locale." It got special billing as a place to buy waterfront property for under \$1 million in a special section titled "You Can Still Retire Rich: How To Protect Your Dreams."

The average home price at the time was \$288,500. Now the average price is roughly double, and

quadruple if the house is on the waterfront.

By that time, sewer and water service to the island was almost ready to be installed. When the pipes were finally laid, the brackish water and overstressed septic systems that many islanders had tolerated for decades were gone.

But before those pipes went in the ground, a growing number saw that the island was a good place to invest.

Barrett pinpoints the arrival of the late Jeanne Geiger as the moment the island irreversibly changed.

"She wanted to do something with the island and had plenty of money, so she overpaid because she could," said Barrett. "She made the biggest change because she took away the local barrooms and restaurants and upgraded the price of homes. She singlehandedly came along and made the biggest change."

It was September 2003 when Geiger, a Pennsylvania woman then living in New York, bought Walton's, which she renamed "blue, The Inn on the Beach." She paid \$4.9 million — the highest price ever paid for an island property.

The inn, which Geiger completely renovated, now commands some of the highest overnight rates in the area — ranging from \$395 to \$1,095 per night in the summer.

The hotel started to evolve into

sort becoming a whole different island

an upscale setting for Geiger's interests. With friend Keith Ablow, a forensic psychiatrist, author and television personality, Geiger organized a fundraiser at blue for Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry in July 2004, attracting media attention to the island. She also used it to raise funds for the Women's Crisis Center.

Kezer says she noticed with the arrival of Geiger other wealthy investors followed suit.

In May 2005, Geiger purchased PJ's Variety for \$465,000 and announced plans to convert the 30-year-old Northern Boulevard diner and informal island hang-out into an upscale catering business. She also bought two single-family homes on Southern Boulevard for \$1.65 million.

She was in the process of transforming blue into an elegant beachside hotel when she fell off a third-floor deck in February 2005 and later died from her injuries.

During the weeks prior to her death, Geiger was also on the verge of completing a transaction that included Atty. May's Beachcoma, an eclectic bar and restaurant at 23 Plum Island Blvd., as well as beachfront fried seafood restaurant Atty. May's on the Beach, plus two cottages behind the Beachcoma and a parking lot across the street.

"Those places are all still empty," Barrett, 55, said. "Those local places for the local people are

gone. She had a dream, but she forgot about the other 1,200 homes on the island."

Since Geiger's death, much of the property has sat vacant. PJ's is up for sale, but her husband has kept mum on what he will do with the rest of the property. Geiger's hotel is open, but there are only a couple of restaurants in operation on the island today.

A different island

"The island is not as friendly as it used to be," said Gene Smith, a retired New York Times reporter now living on the island. "Even for the people who only lived there part time, everyone knew each other. Now everyone lives there and works elsewhere — that is the biggest change."

Smith, 83, moved to the island four years ago with his wife Lois, a retired public relations representative for Hollywood celebrities, but sees a difference in the island of today and what it once was.

"We owned the house for over 40 years, but we've only lived here year-round for four," Smith, who lives on Southern Boulevard, said. "The sizes of the houses have changed, as well as the values ever since it was featured in Fortune Magazine. It was bound to go up in price."

Smith remembers the island much like Kezer does, when times were simpler and Smith was allowed to camp out near the beach and ski down the sand dunes.

"I grew up in Medford, and a group of us would come for a day or a few days," he said. "Even though we were only part-time residents, we knew everyone. Now residents mostly work elsewhere, and they don't hang around the island. I'd say that is the biggest change."

"I enjoyed it tremendously as a kid," Smith said. "We would swim and just fool around. My kids loved it as well, but I never thought my wife would want to leave New York, but she loves it too."

Plum Island with its hunkered-down cottages next to expansive year-round beach homes today looks like two opposing forces dueling for control of the island, but Kezer says it is part of the island's appeal.

"You can have a shack next to a million-dollar home," Kezer said. "People are buying the land, and they can then tear it down and put up something to today's standards."

Despite the change of landscape, the buying up of land and the push to build bigger, island residents say there are still a lot of people who do not understand the ramshackle beauty on the northern coast of the state.

"People come up from Boston to look at a house," Kezer said. "They have never been here before, and when we get out onto the island they ask where the good part is — and I tell them they have already missed it."

who is one year old.

Clippings

Continued from page 2
Lauderdale - Las Vegas - Los Angeles - Newark - Miami - Pittsburgh - Nashville - Cincinnati - Minneapolis/St. Paul - Orange County, California - Detroit - Washington, D.C. (Dulles, Reagan) - Charlotte - St. Louis.

Trends

Esquire magazine offered a 70-year retrospective of styles for men to celebrate the magazine's 70th birthday. ** Fashion designer Giorgio Armani's statements on the '30s included the icons: "...Cary Grant, with his mesmerizing charm, his soft-cut shirts and loose collars. The nimble Fred Astaire, dancing his way through the decade in top hat and tails. Elegance in fashion and decor..." The Prince of Wales with his patterned combinations. To be continued....

Word wisdom

Gandhi's title "Mahatma" means "great soul" in

Sanskrit. ** Reader's Digest's "Word Power" is always an excellent source of word meanings & derivations. From the Greek "dogmatikos" (opinion), we have our English word "dogmatic" meaning someone very opinionated, dictatorial. — From Latin "quaere" we get our English word "query" to question. ** This one from Family Circle magazine. The French delicacy, "foie gras" (pronounced fwa gra) is a 4 to 5 month fattened duck or goose liver, writes R. Ruttle. Foie gras means "fat liver." As an aside Ruttle says that the cost of the gourmet specialty will be \$60 to \$80 for a pound & a half raw!

Travel tips

Five writers listed their favorite vacation spots enjoyed with their families. Plum Island, Massachusetts. Madeline Island, Wisconsin. Gallatin National Forest, Montana. Gulf Shores, Alabama.

Pescadero, California. (Writers J. Picoult - C. Newman. - D. Heitman - A. Kesselheim.) Any of your favorites here?

TV clip

According to ABC News there are 100 flights leaving every hour from Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. ** Watching CBS Evening News, I learned the sad numbers that there are nine million children without health care. ** Found this one to really be surprising. Even though our sons were eager viewers of PBS as they went through the varied stages of childhood, I didn't realize the average age of the PBS viewer. From an article by columnist George Will in the Chicago Sun Times, "The average PBS viewer is 58 years old." !!!

Life's little irritants

Tangled paper clips! No more needs to be said, right?

About animals

An article written to awaken tourists to our national parks regarding the dangers therein, as the wild animals. Entitled "Dumb and Dumber," M. Loftus reveals incidents in such as Yellowstone National Park where tourists foolishly get too close to the bison. They have gored people, head butted them. At a ton each and able to sprint 30 miles an hour, the warnings state that it's against the law to approach bison within 25 yards! Loftus adds that the National Park Rangers have been spread so thin due to their call to

STATE: Legislature passes Environmental Bond Bill

■ Continued from Page 1

Adam Martignetti, spokesperson for Costello.

Items earmarked for funding include flood control along Route 1 in Salisbury.

"Bond bills appropriate money for 10 years; the governor has the final authority on authorizing the money," Martignetti said. "Both Mike and Sen. Steven Baddour will have to try and make the case to the respective agencies as part of the bond bill."

Among those agencies who will need to be contacted before work can begin include the Seaport Authority and Coastal Zone Management.

"Some of the projects fall under the Seaport Advisory Council or the Department of Recreation and Conservation," Martignetti said. "Costello and Baddour have good relationships with those agencies to begin with."

Martignetti noted Lieutenant Governor Timothy Murray's recent visit to the district as a promising sign. Murray is the

PROJECTS APPROVED

Projects Funded Through the Bond Bill in Newburyport, Amesbury and Salisbury

- \$1.8 million for the Port of Newburyport including commercial fishing improvements, marine transportation, education, fish market and improvements.
- \$2.8 million Newburyport Boardwalk
- \$1 million Waterfront Park
- \$1.6 million Salisbury Boardwalk at Ocean Front
- \$1 million dredging and jetty repair in the Merrimack River
- \$500,000 creation of Heritage Park in Lower Millyard Amesbury
- \$400,000 sports fishing, parking, trails at Deer Island Park Amesbury
- \$350,000 flood control Route 1 Salisbury
- \$250,000 small boat and kayak launch Lower Millyard Amesbury
- \$150,000 repairs and new floats at Cashman Park boat launch
- \$65,000 kayak launch in Salisbury
- \$40,000 rehabilitation of the Joppa Flats boat launch

chair of the Seaport Advisory Council.

"Seaport has already shown a willingness to invest in Newburyport, and that bodes well for a lot of these projects."

Last month, Sen. Baddour, whose district includes Newburyport and Salisbury, and state Sen. Bruce Tarr, a Gloucester Republican who

represents Newbury, inserted two amendments into an Environmental Bond Bill to aid the replenishment of beaches in all three communities.

The Senate passed the amended bond bill, which included \$2.5 million for fighting erosion on Plum Island beach, which is shared by Newbury and Newburyport, and a Salisbury Beach Preservation

Trust Fund that would be built up by levying a \$2 surcharge on admissions to the reservation for parking and camping. Both of those projects are included in the list of projects passed in the bond bill yesterday.

The projects chosen as priorities to local cities and towns are not on any specific time line but will begin as Gov. Deval Patrick designates the funds.

"Some will start sooner than others," Martignetti said, noting all the projects must undergo a formal review at the executive level. "There are some immediate needs and projects like the boat launch, which are a no-brainer and can be done sooner than others."

The last time an environmental bond bill was passed was in 2002. That bond provided critical support for many important local projects, including the Indian Hill project in West Newbury and the Common Pasture acquisition in Newburyport.

The funding from the 2002 bond bill is now almost completely depleted.

Newbury/Rowley

Plum Island summer rentals stay strong

BY VICTOR TINE
STAFF WRITER

PLUM ISLAND — Recession? What recession?

Rental agents for houses on Plum Island say they are booking vacation properties at or near last year's levels.

"We're booking almost 100 percent of our units," said Linda McKeehan of Plum Island Beach Rentals. "We had a bit of a lag when people were talking about beach erosion, but it wasn't the whole beach."

McKeehan's agency has about 20 to 25 properties under contract, not all of them for the whole sum-

mer season, but she said she's not having difficulty filling them. Her properties range in price from \$800 to \$4,000 a week.

Barbara Kezer of Port Properties, a multi-generation Plum Islander who has been dealing with island real estate for many years, said she hasn't seen a drop in rentals, but she hasn't seen a surge either.

"As far as (2008) goes, we're pretty much at 95 percent of where we were last year," Kezer said.

Port Properties has about 15 properties under contract, with the high end of the rental range at about \$2,200 per week.

Kezer said much of her business comes from repeat customers who rent the same house during the same summer weeks every year.

Kezer said she also sees an upswing in sharing arrangements.

"Two families will rent a larger place and then share the expenses," she said.

She has also noticed more "For Rent" signs than usual in front of individual properties and assumes that the owners are in the market.

McKeehan, who has been renting Plum Island properties for 15 years, said she thinks the "staycation" phenomenon, in which peo-

ple vacation close to home to save money, is at work this summer.

She said many of her customers are from Massachusetts, or they have relatives and friends in Newburyport and want to visit while they vacation.

McKeehan said the island's proximity to downtown Newburyport and its compact geography are also attractions in the age of \$4-a-gallon gasoline.

"Once people get here, they know they don't have to spend any more money," she said. "They can put away the car and walk to the beach or, if they have to drive, it's only a short distance to Newburyport."

FUNDING: \$2.5M must still be OK'd by House, governor

■ *Continued from Page 1*

Baddour said in a statement released yesterday. "Now we are taking action to generate the funding we need to get the job done."

Tarr could not be reached for comment yesterday, but at the most recent meeting on June 17, an Army Corps of Engineers coastal expert recommended the installation of one or more "geotubes" along the beach for about

600 feet from Plum Island Center northward, an area that has seen extensive erosion in recent years.

A geotube is a 200-foot-long fabric cylinder that is filled with and covered with sand. It provides a soft barrier to wave-driven erosion.

At the time, Tarr said he would see about state funding for geotubes. They also require environmental permits, but the Army Corps representative said they can be installed quickly and are both stable and easily repaired if torn.

Geotubes could stabilize the beach while the Army Corps proceeds with a study to determine the cost effectiveness of taking sand that would be dredged from the Merrimack River channel and depositing it directly onto the shore. Dredging is expected to occur next summer.

If the \$2.5 million is appropriated, it is not immediately clear who would manage the money.

Plum Island Center is considered the critical point because the

erosion is worst there. A section of the deck of the former Jeanne's restaurant building has been removed because the dune under it was compromised.

In addition, the Center is at the confluence of Plum Island Boulevard, the only road to the island, and Northern and Southern boulevards, the principal routes in both directions. A breach at the Center could potentially cut off access to the mainland and create a public safety hazard.

PI beach funding clears first hurdle Senate OKs \$2.5M for restoration

BY VICTOR TINE
STAFF WRITER

PLUM ISLAND — The state Senate has approved a \$2.5 million amendment to a bond bill that would pay for beach restoration on Plum Island.

The measure must still pass the House and obtain Gov. Deval Patrick's signature, but co-sponsor Sen. Bruce Tarr said he is "optimistic about the chances for both."

The Gloucester Republican, whose district includes Newbury, has been conducting a series of meetings with local, state and federal officials to try to find both immediate and long-term solutions to beach erosion problems from the

New Hampshire border to Cape Ann.

The other co-sponsor is Sen. Steven Baddour, the Methuen Democrat whose district includes both Newburyport and Salisbury.

The Senate version of the Environmental Bond Bill also establishes a Salisbury Beach Preservation Trust Fund, which would generate revenue by having the state Department of Conservation and Recreation charge a \$2 surcharge on all admissions to Salisbury Beach State Reservation.

"Funding has arisen as a major challenge in our efforts to confront serious issues at these beaches,"

Please see **FUNDING**, Page 7

\$2.5 million beach fund approved by House

By VICTOR TINE
STAFF WRITER

PLUM ISLAND — A \$2.5 million fund for sand restoration and beach erosion control at Plum Island has passed the state Legislature and now awaits the signature of Gov. Deval Patrick.

The amendment to an Environmental Bond Bill, sponsored by Sens. Bruce Tarr and Steven Baddour, emerged from the House unscathed at the end of last week. Tarr is a Gloucester Republican whose district includes Newbury, and Baddour is a Methuen Democrat who counts Newburyporters among his constituents.

Both men have recently expressed optimism that Patrick will sign the bill.

The money will be used to finance whatever plan local and state officials devise to build up the beach, especially at Plum Island Center, although the measure does not restrict spending to any one location on the island.

The fund will be administered by the state Department of Conservation and Recreation, according to a copy of the bill released by state Rep. Harriett Stanley's office yesterday. Stanley is a West Newbury Democrat who also represents Newbury.

Newbury will also be the recipient of a \$100,000 Lighter, Amphibious, Resupply, Cargo vehicle "to transport personnel, equipment and materials in the beachfront area of Plum Island," according to the text of the bill.

Since the beginning of the year, Tarr has chaired a series of meetings of federal, state and local officials in an attempt to come up with both immediate and long-term solutions to what has become an increasingly serious beach erosion problem on the island.

Plum Island Center is considered the critical point because the erosion is worst there. A section of the deck of the former Jeanne's restaurant building has been removed because the dune under it was compromised.

In addition, the Center is at the confluence of Plum Island Boulevard, the only road on and off the island, and Northern and Southern boulevards, the principal routes in both directions. A breach at the Center could potentially cut off access to the mainland and create a public safety hazard.