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Officials, citizens focus on Park Point erosion

📅 On January 15, 2020 / By John Ramos

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At the Duluth City Council’s agenda session on Jan. 9, 2020, Mayor Emily Larson presented the Council with a proposed list of legislative priorities, which Duluth will pursue this year at the state Legislature. The city’s top priority, a \$13.5 million bonding request for “Coastal Infrastructure Rehabilitation Projects,” includes “reconstruction of seawalls, shoreline armoring, and repair of the adjoining public spaces and infrastructure.” Should the request be granted, the two biggest projects will be replacing the seawall in front of the DECC and continuing work to repair and protect the storm-damaged Lakewalk.

As councilors discussed the request, newly-elected Third District Councilor Roz Randorf brought up another coastal problem: the erosion of Park Point beaches. Over the past several years, high Lake Superior water levels and frequent big storms have stripped away the Park Point dunes, to the point that some people’s homes are in jeopardy. “Is it too [soon] to have an ask on here for any potential bonding money for Park Point, for any remediation?” asked Randorf.

Lobbyist Kevin Walli replied, “My view would be that, when you go to the Legislature, you should have a well-crafted solution in mind, and don’t go too far ahead of the planning process within the community ... So I think it’s perfectly appropriate to discuss it, to plan for it, do that intensively now, but ... it does take the time to queue up, so I would encourage working hard in the planning process and getting ready for this [for a future bonding year].”



Credit: John Ramos

At the Council’s regular meeting on Jan. 13, Councilor Randorf introduced an amendment to the city’s legislative priorities. Rather than requesting bonding funds directly, the amendment called on the state to create “Legislation establishing a state program to assist local communities, such as Duluth’s Park Point, with resources to address infrastructure and property damage caused by erosion and high water levels in the Great Lakes due to climate change.” The resolution was tabled for revisions, but will likely be approved at the Council’s next meeting.

The properties most affected by waves lie in the six blocks between the Aerial Lift Bridge and the S-curve at 12th Street. Those homes

Park Point erosion


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are closer to the water than the other homes on the Point. There are now sheer eight- or ten-foot drop-offs separating their yards from the beach.



Credit: John Ramos

Resident Jan Karon, who lives on that stretch, periodically sends the Duluth City Council pictures of the damage. When I spoke with her on Jan. 15, she said, “The lake has been eating the dune for the last few years ... We used to walk out our back gate, up over the dune, and down the other side of the dune, and then there’d be 20 feet to the edge of the water. Little by little, the dune has been eroded by the lake. My neighbor built stairs so I could get down, and they were [carried] a mile and a half away after the last storm, so now I don’t have stairs. Now I have to go three properties over ... so I can get down.”

Park Point citizens have organized and are working on the issue. This past July, the Park Point Community Club formed an Erosion and High Water Committee to study the problem and advocate for solutions. The committee is chaired by Hamilton Smith. When I spoke with Mr. Smith on Jan. 15, he said, “The waves become an acute problem [on the lake side of the Point] when you have an

east wind. It's an ongoing, systemic problem when you don't. And then ... [there] are the people on the bay side. Because the lake's up, the bay's up, and they're losing their backyards at a pretty alarming rate. And when there's a west wind, they're getting all sorts of damage."



Credit: John Ramos

In addition to the severe erosion, the elevated water levels are creating flooding problems. "The storm sewer system and the sanitary sewer system are overwhelmed from the water infiltrating," said Smith, "—either keeping the water from running down the storm sewers because the water level's so high that it's got no place to go, or the high water from the lake that's filling our little sandbar up with water is leaching into the sanitary sewer and overtaxing the sanitary sewer."

"How about basements?" I asked. "Is everybody's basement getting flooded?"

"I was astounded when we did [a] survey, which we did in September, how many people are dealing with water in their

basement,” said Smith. “We had 90-some respondents, and 56 of them had water in their basement.”

As for his own basement, Smith said, “I have it under control now, only because I have a sump pump and I have two surface pumps ... so only about a third to a half of my basement floor is wet now that I have those three pumps in there. Before, it was wall to wall, and I had to get a new furnace, because it rotted out the bottom of the furnace. So I have done that part, but it still makes the basement kind of unusable.”



Credit: John Ramos

As the Monitor reported a few weeks ago, one possible remedy for the erosion problem may be to have the Army Corps of Engineers replenish the beach with sand that is dredged from shipping channels—a process known as “beach nourishment.” The Corps did this in 2019 near the end of Park Point, in an area with no houses, and early indications are that it is going well. At a meeting of the Harbor Technical Advisory Committee held on Dec. 4, 2019, the director of government and environmental affairs for the Seaway Port Authority said that the waves had “kind of lifted that material and pushed [down Park Point] and created just a beautiful beach.”

This year, the Army Corps has permits to add more beach nourishment to the same location as last year, near the end of the point. Representatives of the Corps have indicated that they are open to future possible beach nourishment projects in other locations. According to Smith, State Senator Erik Simonson has been a big help in getting people together to focus on the problem. “He took an interest right away. He was at the first meeting we had in October at City Hall. He was instrumental in putting together the meeting [the Park Point Community Club] had last Wednesday [with legislators and city councilors], and he plans on putting together another meeting soon, this one with the DNR, MPCA, Corps of Engineers, the city and our group.”

If water levels remain high, of course, even a replenished beach could be washed away. Smith said the Erosion Committee recognized that, but felt it urgent to replenish the beach nonetheless. “What we’re trying to do is get the Corps of Engineers next year to do beach nourishment on the lake side between the bridge and the S-curve. Beach nourishment’s only a temporary fix, but it can last three to five years, so if you could get the Corps to do it even every five years, you can mitigate the problem, at least in that area. If you could get them to do across-the-beach nourishment the whole length of Park Point, you might be able to do a stop-gap for all of the beach erosion.”

Asked if he thought they would be successful, Smith said, “It all takes government action, and getting the wheels of government to turn quickly is...it’s frustrating.”



Credit: John Ramos

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6 Replies to “Officials, citizens focus on Park Point erosion”



Pto says:

January 16, 2020 at 3:47 am

Don't build on what is actually a very large, yet temporary sand bar. Especially one no longer being replenished by natural sediment after you've created a channel, added a jetty and dredge channels every year. Oh, by the way, exactly why is the public paying for this?

[REPLY](#)**Vlad the Impaler** says:

January 16, 2020 at 1:53 pm

There's no point in calling erosion a problem. It's just process. Lakes constantly reform their shorelines for any number of reasons, but often because river sediments create shallower shore depths, and shallower shore depths cause higher wave runup with more energy that eats the banks, and etc. Over time all lakes will expand their shorelines as river sediments continue to flow in.

This isn't new. Lake levels are not rising; record levels were recorded 35 years ago. How can they rise when the St. Mary's outlet regulates the level? Fluctuation, sure. Rising? Not happening. Do a practical experiment with a bucket to prove it. Lake Superior will always have a surface elevation near 183m with seasonal fluctuations.

Anything that's done to the shore will impact another part since that's the way hydrologic systems work. Replenish here, create a shallower spot with more erosion elsewhere. Just accept the geologic scale. In any case, fooling around with it will only cost money and be temporary. Sorry residents, but that's just the way it goes. Accept your remaining time, then celebrate the house collapse as your participation in nature.

[REPLY](#)**John Ramos** says:

January 16, 2020 at 4:32 pm

Well, since the Corps needs to put their dredge sand somewhere, there's no reason not to put it on the beach. Or does your laissez-faire attitude about natural systems mean we should stop dredging the shipping channels, too?

REPLY



Vlad the Impaler says:

January 16, 2020 at 10:23 pm

Nothing laissez-faire about it. Replenish the sand if they want but there will be repercussions in another area of shoreline. Natural systems don't care about home assessments. Take a look at the offshore east coast islands that became the vacation retreats of the wealthy: turns out the islands have always been in motion. Whoops. Bye bye \$10M house.

REPLY



Vlad the Impaler says:

January 16, 2020 at 2:04 pm

The lake levels will never rise, but they can always drop. Maybe there will be 500' of extra beach in 5,000 years if there's a reduction in precipitation. Happy lakefront owners.

But then Spirit Mountain will complain... Where does it all end?!

REPLY



WhoReallyIndeed says:

January 17, 2020 at 1:05 pm

Yeah, I don't get why the taxpayer needs to support those who choose to live on a sandbar so weird that water makes its way into your house... wtf.

REPLY

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