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GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

# Duluth searches for solution to shredded metal cans found on Park Point beach

The shards were dredged from the harbor and dumped on the beach along with tons of sand as the city sought to slow erosion.

Written By: Peter Passi | Feb 6th 2021 - 7am.



Jan Karon, left, holds a bag of can shards she collected along the beach of Lake Superior on Park Point in October, while Sally Rauschenfels shows examples of some of the pieces she's found, including ring-tab beer cans from the 1960s and '70s, while the pair stand on the now snow-covered beach just down from the dredge area of Park Point on Tuesday. (Jed Carlson / jcarlson@superiortelegam.com)

High water and repeated storms have washed away much of the beach and dunes on portions of Park Point's lakeside, allowing waves to lash ever closer to homes on this unique spit of land jutting into Lake Superior at the mouth of the St. Louis River.

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Before Duluth dug a ship canal and constructed breakwalls to help safely usher marine traffic into the harbor, sediments and gravel used to be swept down the shore, steadily feeding the beaches of Park Point. But since human-made structures have disrupted that natural flow of material, lakefront beaches have steadily eroded.

Buck and other Park Point residents mobilized, urging city officials to work with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to bolster the beach. In response, the Corps arranged to place about 53,000 cubic yards of dredge material on the shrinking stretch of beach between August and September of last year.

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## Unwelcome discovery

Sally Rauschenfels, who lives in the area, said shards of metal began showing up on the beach shortly afterward. The problem first came to her attention when her dog, Daphne, started to limp during a beach walk, and an inspection of the standard poodle's paw revealed a sharp piece of metal from a shredded can embedded in it.

Daphne made a full recovery, but Rauschenfels started to inspect the beach with greater scrutiny and found more and more metal glinting in the sand.

Before the onset of winter, Rauschenfels and a neighbor, Jan Karon, collected several bushels of what appear to be shredded tin and aluminum cans dating back to the 1970s.



Bags of partially shredded metal cans still have sand from the shore on Park Point on them at the residence of Sally Rauschenfels on Tuesday in Duluth. (Jed Carlson / jcarlson@superiortelegram.com)

In January, the Corps of Engineers finally agreed to announce that it had a problem, advising beachgoers to exercise caution in the area and pledging to address the issue, which remains of unknown scope.

“We’re still looking at what we can do and what options we have at this point,” said Bill Dowell, public affairs chief for the Detroit District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Until winter passes and that assessment is complete, however, Dowell said he didn’t want to even speculate what those options may be.

The emerging issue has left more than a few Park Pointers crestfallen.

“I feel a little embarrassed myself,” Buck said, explaining that she had worked hard to bring about the beach project only to discover later to her chagrin that in trying to fix one dilemma, another problem had been created.

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cans in the area.

“We go in and we do sampling and we do testing. But that testing involves a small area. It’s not a giant scoop,” he said.

## Tough to remedy

Now that the metal shards are intermixed with tons and tons of sand on the beach, a thorough cleanup could prove difficult, costly and perhaps impractical.

But Dowell expressed confidence the Corps will be up to the task.

“It is a complicated situation. But we, as the Corps of Engineers, are the nation’s engineers. We’re given complicated engineering situations that need to be taken care of, and we work hard and we do that, right?” he said.

As many of the shredded cans are made of aluminum, magnets would likely be of only modest help in dealing with the refuse.

Meanwhile, continually beachcombing the area to remove emerging metal shards by hand strikes 3rd District Duluth City Councilor Roz Randorf as an inadequate solution.

“I think that as the situation is unfolding, it’s getting more serious than we originally thought,” she said. “Who knew there were so many pollutants and so much dumping in the bay where they got this material? It just blows your mind to think that there was so much garbage dumped into the lake.”



Jan Karon, left, talks to Sally Rauschenfels about the bags of metal shards they’ve picked up along the beach of Lake Superior on Park Point in October while they stand along the area Tuesday afternoon. (Jed Carlson / jcarlson@superiortelegam.com)

Randorf suggested it may be necessary to actually dig up the dredge spoils and sift through them.

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Dowell said the Corps takes the situation seriously.

“The men and women who work for the Corps of Engineers and the ones at the Duluth area office, a lot of them grew up there. They’re members of the community. They have animals. They have pets. They use the beach. None of us want this. This is really a situation that’s unfortunate. And as community members, we all just want to get this taken care of,” he said.

Dowell offered assurances that the Corps will address the situation, although perhaps not to everyone’s complete satisfaction.

## Further dredging

Meanwhile, plans are still in the works for more dredge materials to be placed farther down the same stretch of eroding beach yet this year at the request of residents, said Jim Filby Williams, Duluth’s director of parks, properties and libraries.

“We have directed the Corps to develop and send us a written plan, describing how they will assess and mitigate the hazards from the 2020 beach restoration project and avoid any recurrence of those problems in future beach restoration projects,” he said.



Sally Rauschenfels holds shards of cans, some from the 1960s, she found along the shore of Lake Superior near the dredging area in October. The cans are believed to have been kicked out from the dredging process. (Jed Carlson / jcarlson@superiortelegram.com)

But not all residents are onboard, fearing that yet more surprises could arrive with additional dredge spoils.

While Karon acknowledged significant erosion of the beach in front of her own home and a fear of property damage from the encroaching waves, she also expressed misgivings about using more dredge materials from the harbor.

Karon recalled watching as dredge spoils were pumped onto the beach last year and said she was overwhelmed by what she described as a “terrible toxic smell” that gave her “an instant headache.”

“Some of the neighbors want this, no matter the cost to the environment of the lake. I don’t,” Karon said.

Willis Mattison, a retired ecologist for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency turned citizen environmental advocate, has taken an interest in the situation and warned of the risks of using dredge materials from an area known to contain pockets of industrial legacy contaminants, such as the Duluth-Superior Harbor.

“You can’t predict what you’re going to find. They didn’t know and weren’t prepared to handle a surprise like metal cans that got shredded and presented their own hazard out on the beach. But they are the proverbial tip of the iceberg,” Mattison said.

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Multiple ring-top beer cans are mixed in with more current can shards found along the shores on Park Point near the dredging area. (Jed Carlson / jcarlson@superiortelegam.com)

Mattison asked for a report detailing tests the Corps conducted on dredge materials both before they were exhumed and after they were deposited last year. But he said he was told he would need to file a Freedom of Information Act request to see them, which he did in November.

“We’re investigating the other unknowns that may alter the course of future dredging, and hopefully we’ll get this straightened out before the summer dredging season, so that the needs are satisfied: The Park Point people get the beach protected, navigation continues, the lake is protected, and people are healthy out there,” he said.

Buck, too, expressed a desire to know more.

“I think people are wondering: Are there better options than dredge material from an industrial harbor for the pristine waters of Lake Superior?” she said.

Dowel said the Corps would take added precautions if and when it takes up work again on the Park Point beach this year. He stressed that the discovery of shredded metal was extremely unusual.

“Since 2013, we have put 1.1 million cubic yards of material in areas that need restoration around the Duluth-Superior Harbor, and this is the first time that we know of that anything like this has happened,” Dowel said.

That may be the case, but Hamilton Smith, another Park Point resident, said to have the material show up on a popular public beach was a great misfortune.

“They couldn’t have picked a worse place for that to show up obviously, of all the restoration projects they’ve done. It couldn’t have been a worse place,” he said.

Filby Williams remains optimistic that the fluke incident won’t be repeated, however.

“What happened in 2020 was an exceptionally unusual event, very nearly a unicorn. So, I think there is reason to be hopeful that with multiple additional meaningful safeguards and controls in the Corps’ process, that this already exceptionally unusual event will not recur,” he said.

Filby Williams encouraged people to keep an eye on the big picture.

“We have a longer-term public need to find a way to protect and restore that riverfront in a way that is protective simultaneously of the public beach and adjoining homes,” he said. “That is a very difficult and exceedingly complex problem that is not going to go away. So, I

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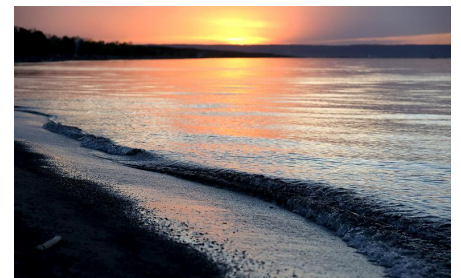
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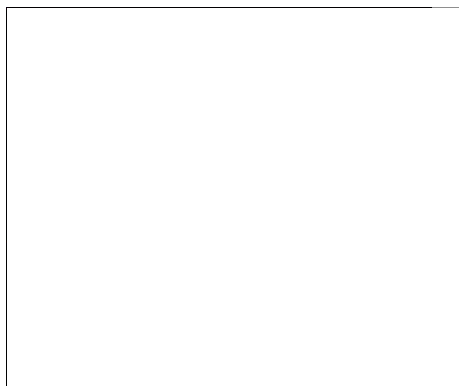
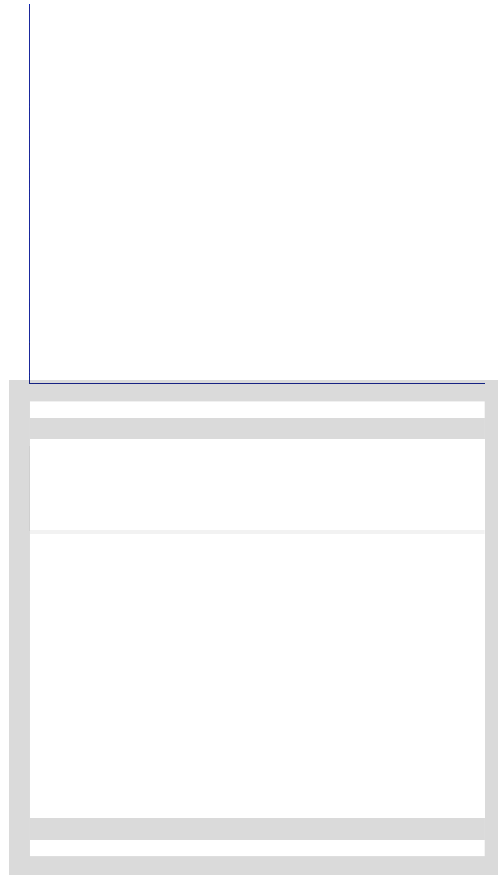
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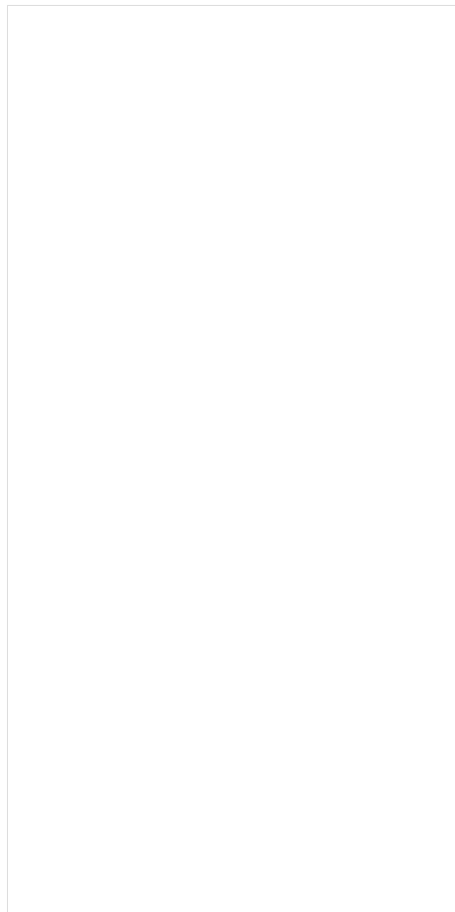


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