

STATE & REGION

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Residents work to save Duluth's Park Point

Increasingly severe weather is washing away the sandbar.

By JANA HOLLINGSWORTH
The Minnesota Star Tribune

DULUTH - Currents racing at up to 8 feet per second created dangerous waves at the mouth of the Duluth canal during a June 21 storm, as extreme weather phenomena whipped up Lake Superior.

An air pressure-driven meteotsunami and wind-driven seiche made water fluctuate

across the massive lake, receding from some shores by several feet and flooding others, as it sloshed back and forth like a bathtub.

It was the most powerful seiche to reach Minnesota Point since 2012, said longtime resident Paul Treuer, with the water level suddenly rising by more than a foot.

For him and other residents of Minnesota Point, home to the Park Point neighborhood reached by the Aerial Lift Bridge, the storm served as another reminder of Lake Superior's might as extreme

weather increases across the globe.

"This place is in trouble," Treuer said. "It's just a sandbar that we live on ... it's not permanent."

That nearly seven-mile sandspit protects the ships and terminals inside the busy international Duluth-Superior port, where more than 700 vessels move 30 million tons of cargo each year. It is also home to 1,300 people, a U.S. Coast Guard station, an airport, marina and hotels, and it sees hundreds of thousands of annual visitors to its miles of

public beach. And it is part of a delicate ecosystem, with an old-growth red and white pine forest, unmarked Indigenous burial grounds and rare coastal dunes found nowhere else in Minnesota.

Fierce storms create huge waves that slam into the barrier island's famous shores, washing sand away, shearing off large sections of dunes and uprooting trees. When water levels are low, high winds push piles of sand into yards and the main road. When water levels rise, lower-lying parts of the island,



AARON LAVINSKY • The Minnesota Star Tribune
A section of Park Point beach under threat of washing away.

SEE PARK POINT ON B4 »

Pastor, 83, vows to stay in the fight



MYRON MEDCALF
Columnist

On a recent afternoon, Pastor Curtis Farrar sat in his steel wheelchair at the front of his church, checking his messages on a pair of phones.

"I'll be walking pretty soon," the leader of Worldwide Outreach for Christ in south Minneapolis told me as he wiggled his legs. "Just a matter of time."

Three years ago, Farrar lost consciousness while he delivered a sermon at his church a few skips from where George Floyd was murdered. The fall nearly killed the 83-year-old pastor. He was paralyzed and hospitalized with a broken neck and injured spine. That day altered his life.

But it did not rob him of his resilience. It only strengthened it.

"This is probably one of the best things that could ever happen to me because of what I'm gathering, what I'm learning," he said. "You got patience, compassion, humility, things I could not have learned, just walking."

Just outside, the sun-baked street now known worldwide after Floyd's murder teemed with folks who snapped selfies and bought souvenirs. For some, it has become a tourist site.

For Farrar and many of his parishioners, however, it's just home.

Over four-plus decades he's been a pastor on this block and withstood every development and challenge in the area. He's also bonded with community members, neighbors, politicians, police officers and the folks who make their living off the grid. He treats them all with respect, which is why they all feel welcome in his church's pews.

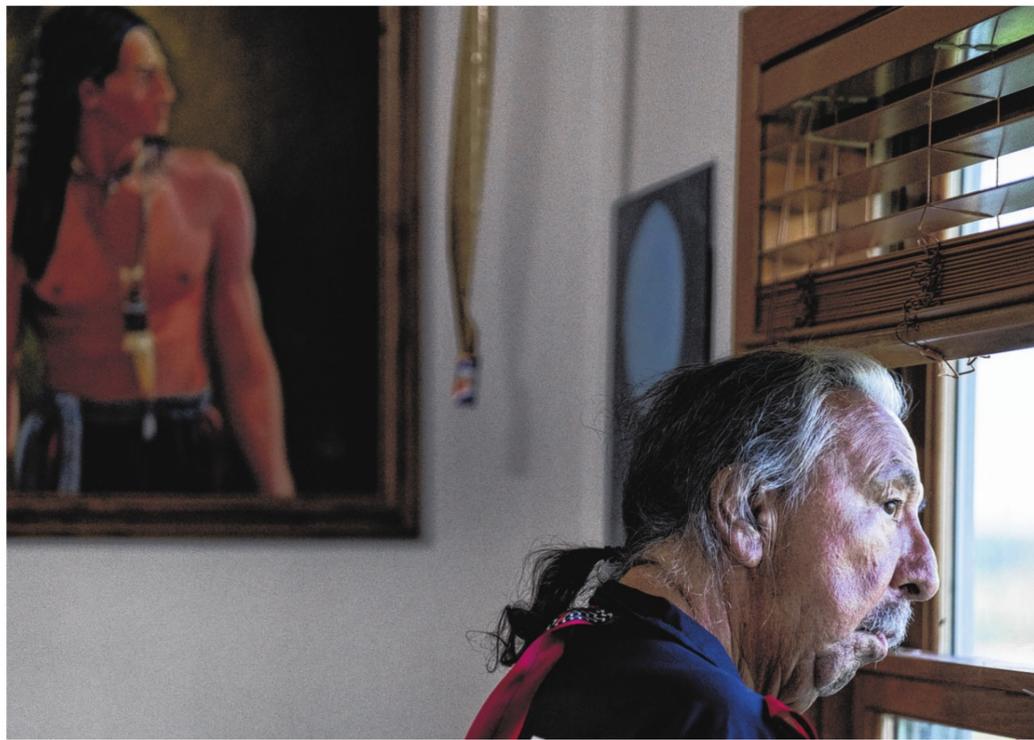
Farrar also refuses to leave. His church is paid for and he doesn't owe any debts. At his age, just 17 years shy of a century, he could take a break and enjoy retirement with his wife. But he has no interest in that path. Too much preaching and living to do, he says.

"I really love this community," Farrar said as his eyes watered. "This is where God placed me."

The public conversation about George Floyd Square

SEE MEDCALF ON B3 »

In 1977, Leonard Peltier was imprisoned for killing two FBI agents in a S.D. shootout. Recently released, he's rebuilding relationships and learning who to trust.



A freed man returns to an unknown world

Story by KIM HYATT • Photos by RICHARD TSONG-TAATARI • The Minnesota Star Tribune

BELCOURT, N.D. - It's been six months since Leonard Peltier walked out of prison, and the first family reunion he could attend in 50 years went on without him over the weekend.

Relatives expected him and said they were disappointed the 80-year-old patriarch didn't show. Instead, Peltier nostalgically cruised the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation, telling stories about

pretty girls and fast cars. He got takeout chicken, watched CNN and called Willie Nelson's ex-wife to catch up.

A few miles down the road, relatives from across the country shared a potluck and played games. Peltier drove past the gathering and didn't stop. Family called him on speaker phone and delivered him plates of food.

The American Indian Movement

(AIM) activist said he didn't attend "for personal reasons." Accusations of theft have caused a rift between him and a sibling. Peltier is also in pain from a recent fall at home and needs a walker again after regaining enough strength to ditch his cane for a time.

He is aging, partly blind and navigating a completely different world

SEE PELTIER ON B5 »



A LIFE RESUMED

Activist Leonard Peltier, top, returned to the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation in North Dakota in February after President Joe Biden commuted his life sentence and he was released from prison. Above, Biden's order of clemency at Peltier's home, and daughter Marquette Peltier at a family reunion last weekend in Belcourt, N.D., a gathering that the family patriarch skipped.

What fate awaits Floyd Square?



ERIC ROPER
Columnist

They had been here before — peering at maps of south Minneapolis amid chatter about detours and traffic flow. Some-

one said it was like the movie "Groundhog Day."

The circular nature of discussions about the future of George Floyd Square lingered over a city event Tuesday to gather feedback about blocking traffic on Chicago Avenue, a concept that had been ditched after a previous public engagement process.

A fundamental question seemed to be buried somewhere in all the Post-It notes and presentation boards (including a rogue board erected by pro-closure activists): Does George Floyd Square belong more to a city neighborhood or the global movement sparked by Floyd's death?

Many neighbors and most business owners don't want to close the street, arguing that it would impede already slow progress at reviving the area. They highlight how dangerous the square became when the streets were blocked for a year after Floyd's death. (Notably, under state law, abutting property owners would also have some veto power over a closure.)

But the City Council voted down keeping the street open and backed a pedestrian plaza instead, overriding a mayoral veto in order to send staffers back to the drawing board. The council asked staff members to report back in December, which happens to follow an election that could result in a new mayor.

Who, then, was the council listening to?

The city's roundup of community feedback said that a "strong vocal group" wanted the street closed vs. a majority of participants who wanted it to remain open. Council Member Emily Koski, the deciding vote for the veto override, said an appeal from Floyd's family had influenced her decision.

"There is a small group of folks who have ... a very loud megaphone that is not a reflection of what the broader community wants," said P.J. Hill, who owns several buildings next to the square and

SEE ROPER ON B3 »

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Brainstorming to shore up Park Point

« **PARK POINT FROM B1** especially on the bay and harbor side, are flooded.

A trifecta of storms between 2017 and 2019 brought days of battering waves and caused millions in damage to Duluth shores.

In 2019, storm surge from waves as high as 15 feet swamped parts of Park Point, and the Lift Bridge — the only way off the island — was temporarily shut down.

Members of the Park Point Community Club, including Treuer, got serious then about protecting the barrier island's residents and hundreds of structures, investigating what kinds of long-term government-crafted plans already existed. Turns out, there wasn't much.

They tapped water science experts at the University of Minnesota Duluth and made inroads with city officials, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

After less formal environmental work through the club, they revived an old preservation nonprofit held by the community club and renamed it Minnesota Point 50 (MP50) in 2023. It's a nonprofit grassroots effort to build a 50-year resiliency plan to protect the point, led by seven board members who are residents of the point.

MP50 held a public kick-off summit this summer to first launch a five-year plan that resulted from a study.

The summit pulled together the community and representatives from the city, the DNR, the Minnesota Sea Grant and the NOAA.

The group is providing “a real service to the community and the state,” said Jim Filby Williams, the city's director of parks, properties and libraries.

Starved and drowning

In the 1860s and 1870s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers carved shipping channels through the sandbar and into the harbor in both Wisconsin and Minnesota, severing it from mainland Duluth and Wisconsin Point.

Breakwaters, piers and dredging dramatically changed how sand and other sediment pushed by wind and waves was distributed along the point.

Since then, the beaches haven't been replenished in the same way, leading to heavy erosion on the south and north ends of the point, near the Wisconsin entry and the Lift Bridge, respectively.

Glacial rebound, a slow but steady lifting of the lake bottom, is tipping water toward Duluth. And as years with little ice coverage on Lake Superior become more common, the point experiences intense waves even in



Park Point residents, above from left, Paul Treuer, Dawn Buck and Pat Sterner are working to save their home, which is under threat as extreme weather becomes more frequent — and destructive. Treuer is a member of the Park Point Community Club, and Sterner is with Minnesota Point 50. Both organizations hope to preserve a long future for their neighborhood.

winter months.

University of Minnesota Duluth scientist John Swenson has said erosion on both sides is starving the point, higher water levels are drowning it and powerful winds are battering it.

On average, between 2.2 and 3.6 feet of sand erode from the lake side each year, according to the DNR.

Erosion and flooding have become more prevalent amid heavy use of the point by visitors and vacationers, said Pat Sterner, a member of MP50.

“More use is great, but it stresses the entire ecosystem,” she said.

A perfect storm

MP50 is involved in grant-writing and organizing, and working with local scientists and experts. The group is planning printed guides, one for property owners and one for visitors for hotels to hand out. For visitors, it will include how to treat the dunes, and for property owners, it will share how to prepare for floods.

MP50 also sought scientific evidence of the point's biggest threats and how to combat them.

The DNR worked with the group to apply for and receive a two-year grant from the National Fish and Wildlife

Foundation. It paid for assistance from the Association of State Floodplain

Managers, which used historic patterns and scientific modeling to plot out best- to worst-case scenarios. It found that if Lake Superior rose beyond 607 feet, which is the building code elevation new structures must have, nearly 150 homes and buildings would flood and more than \$7.4 million in damage would result.

The lake reached 604.75 feet in 2019, a record number.

“We're already seeing storms that are pretty reflective of what we think the perfect storm would look like,” said Eleanor

Rappolee, a geographic information system analyst for the floodplain association.

Their studies showed that the most vulnerable buildings are single-family houses on the harbor side that were built before 1980, especially those with basements. The study suggests filling basements in. The point in the ground where it becomes saturated with water is only about 15 feet down.

New houses on Minnesota Point must be elevated above a certain threshold and built without basements, per modern regulations. But new development should be avoided as much as possible, Rappolee said.

Breach fears

MP50 members worry the next mega-storm might send waves across the island.

Narrow sections of the point where that is most likely sit at the ends and at a spot inside the Park Point Recreation Area. The city is in the midst of redesigning the sinking recreation area, where the road is precipitously close to the water.

A breach near the Lift Bridge would affect the entire point. A breach near the south end could affect the shipping industry and access to the airport.

The Army Corps is nearing the end of a multi-year study to see whether and how much it is responsible for the erosion damage. Its harbor dredging for beach “nourishment” in recent years has been controversial, with metal shards and other debris littering the shores where it's been deposited.

The sand replenishment, which has been done a handful of times, is intended to replace what's been washed away. It is considered a short-term fix.

The Corps didn't respond to questions about the study, but Filby Williams said the results will show how much the Corps could pay in restoration efforts.

Brandon Krumwiede, a scientist with the NOAA in Duluth, said part of the study is exploring whether the point is seeing a net loss in sediment or if it is just pushed around offshore until it is blown back to the beach.

Barrier islands like Minnesota Point “need a sediment source to keep them alive,” he said. Submerged breakwaters to absorb waves are among potential restoration efforts.

Residents, particularly on the north end near the bridge, have been subject to “some scary situations,” including 10-foot piles of sand in their yards, Filby Williams said.

Recent city work on the point has included planting beach grass, a threatened species in Minnesota, to slow erosion, and installing sand fencing to help restore dunes and keep sand in place.

Lake Superior water levels rise and fall in cycles that typically span a decade or so. It is on a downward trend now, data shows, but climate scientists predict higher highs and lower lows in a shorter span of time.

The work resulting from MP50's organizing shows “hard evidence,” Treuer said, of what could happen to Minnesota Point.

Anticipating that can help with repairs and fortification, he said, “and I think that's what our role should be. To quantify it and prepare for it, rather than react to it.”