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Park Point tries to shore up dunes by planting beachgrass

Stabilizing the renourished beach between the Lift Bridge and 12th Street Beach may reduce blowing sand and erosion, but it's no permanent fix. It may not survive storms like those of 2017 and 2018.



U.S. Coast Guard personnel Nathan Carroll, of Chesapeake, Virginia, left, Tyler Green, of Tampa, Florida, center, and Ryland Halliburton, of League City, Texas, volunteer with dune grass planting along Minnesota Point in Duluth on Wednesday, Sept. 9. Dan Williamson / Duluth Media Group

**By Jimmy Lovrien**

Today at 5:54 AM

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DULUTH — On the north end of Park Point, a series of fences and newly planted beachgrass are holding down sand brought in to replace the dunes and shoreline pummeled by storms nearly a decade ago.

Officials and residents hope the fencing and grass will trap blowing sand, allowing it to accumulate and grow the dunes. That could reduce the amount of sand blowing into people's yards or into Park Point roads, where it's managed to disrupt traffic, while also offering properties some protection from Lake Superior's waves — at least until the next powerful storm hits when water levels are high.

Still, Park Point residents want a permanent fix to severe erosion in the area, which is cut off from natural sources of replenishing sediment by breakwalls protruding into Lake Superior.



U.S. Coast Guardsmen Ryland Halliburton, of League City, Texas, right, waters freshly planted dune grass along Minnesota Point on Sept. 9. Dan Williamson / Duluth Media Group

“It’s pretty well understood that it’s a temporary stopgap measure,” said Paul Treuer, a Park Point resident and board member of Minnesota Point 50, which is creating a 50-year plan to address

some of the point's most pressing issues. "Next time we have high water and a huge nor'easter, it's going to wash away."

A series of storms in 2017 and 2018 did just that. Intensified by high water levels on Lake Superior, waves berated Duluth's shoreline, destroying segments of the Lakewalk and [taking dunes on Park Point, particularly between the 12th Street Beach and Aerial Lift Bridge, with it.](https://www.duluthnewstribune.com/news/park-point-residents-assess-damage-worry-about-future-storms)

(<https://www.duluthnewstribune.com/news/park-point-residents-assess-damage-worry-about-future-storms>) Waves splashed against garages.



(<https://www.duluthnewstribune.com/news/park-point-residents-assess-damage-worry-about-future-storms>)

[NEWS\(HTTPS://WWW.DULUTHNEWSTribune.COM/NEWS\)](https://www.duluthnewstribune.com/news)

Park Point residents assess damage, worry about future storms(<https://www.duluthnewstribune.com/news/park-point-residents-assess-damage-worry-about-future-storms>)

Imagine a giant bucket of water that's already full, with the water at its second-highest fall level since accurate records have been kept. Now blow a 60 mph wind across the bucket from the northeast and watch the water overflow on the southwest ...

Oct 30,
2017

• *By John Myers*(<https://www.duluthnewstribune.com/john-myers>)

"It was crisis time ... the homes were in peril," said Dawn Buck, former president of the Park Point Community Club and board member of MP50.

So the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers replenished that area of the beach with material dredged from the harbor, bringing back a buffer between homes and the lake. But that came with its own problems.

First, cans and glass were discovered in the sand, and then the sand wouldn't sit still, forming dunes in residents' yards and across Park Point sidewalks and streets.



U.S. Coast Guardsmen Ryland Halliburton, of League City, Texas, smooths the sand while volunteering with dune grass planting along Minnesota Point. Dan Williamson / Duluth Media Group

That's where the wood snow fence and plantings come in.

Jim Shoberg, a landscape architect for the city of Duluth, said if residents report sand getting through, city staff will look for breaks in the fence or places to add grass.

“And then, if we're fortunate enough to be given a big, big, fat, thick layer of sand, and it buries our fences, we'll put another fence on top of that and capture some more,” Shoberg said. “And we'll keep going until we feel that we have a dune that is representative of pre-disaster conditions.”

The city installed a fence two years ago and another last fall. Together, the fences have captured about a foot, on average, of sand along its more than 1,000-foot length, Shoberg said.



Freshly planted and watered dune grass in the foreground settles near dune grass planted in 2025 on the beach along Minnesota Point in Duluth. Dan Williamson / Duluth Media Group

He said that while the fence can “jump-start” the dune-making process, native grass similarly captures sand.

The city planted 3,000 plugs of native grass last year, three-quarters of which survived, and another 1,000 plugs last month.



Volunteers gather to plant dune grass along Minnesota Point in Duluth on Sept. 9. With eroding sand dunes, the goal is to help stabilize the landscape. Dan Williamson / Duluth Media Group

Though not perfect, Shoberg said the fence and grass are reducing the sand blown into yards and streets.

Karen Updegraff, a regional plant ecologist at the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, said the Point's native beachgrass has an extensive, fibrous root network that can withstand dry conditions.

Even when the substrate of a dune washes away, the grass' connected roots remain suspended in sand, ready to take back over.



Paul Treuer, a Park Point resident, left, prepares to water freshly planted dune grass. Treuer volunteered with Minnesota Point 50. Dan Williamson / Duluth Media Group

“And they’re OK with that,” Updegraff said of the native beachgrass.

There have been plantings of beachgrass on Minnesota Point before, but previous plantings used a strain from Michigan that was too aggressive and crowded out other native species.

But now, Prairie Restoration’s Boreal Natives in Esko is propagating the Minnesota Point grass, so additional plantings are expected.

“The better we can do that, the better we can protect the homeowners and the transitional environment behind it,” Updegraff said.



Adam Fornear, Duluth Parks and Recreation specialist, gestures while chatting with dune grass planting volunteers on the beach along Minnesota Point in Duluth. Dan Williamson / Duluth Media Group

Echoing Buck and Treuer, Shoberg acknowledged that this is “a short-term solution.”

“It leaves the door open for further conversations on what the future holds,” Shoberg said. “But right now we think this will last and should last until the lake gets high again and starts causing the problem.”

And that permanent fix might not be dunes.

That’s because the northern beaches of Minnesota Point were historically cobble, like what you’d find at the mouth of the Lester River or Glensheen Mansion’s beach, not sand.



Park Point residents Nancy Olson, right, and Paul Treuer volunteer to plant dune grass. Dan Williamson / Duluth Media Group

John Swenson, an associate professor of earth and environmental sciences at the University of Minnesota Duluth, [found that\(https://conservancy.umn.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/80a2b065-b455-4902-a2e8-of5679df2bcd/content\)](https://conservancy.umn.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/80a2b065-b455-4902-a2e8-of5679df2bcd/content) breakwalls at the Duluth and Superior ship entries, which bookend Minnesota Point, [effectively cut the area off\(https://conservancy.umn.edu/items/5c8dfedc-46e0-4a3e-98c5-c4c2a3b35c93\)](https://conservancy.umn.edu/items/5c8dfedc-46e0-4a3e-98c5-c4c2a3b35c93) from its source of sediment. Meanwhile, erosion continues.

The Superior Entry blocks waves from carrying sand picked up from eroding bluffs along the South Shore, and the Duluth Entry blocks waves carrying the gravel and cobble eroded from the North Shore.

Before the breakwall, the cobble beach likely extended past 20th Street South before transitioning to sand.



Freshly planted and watered dune grass on the beach along Minnesota Point. Dan Williamson / Duluth Media Group

But because the Army Corps of Engineers renourished the north end of the beach in the 1930s with sand to fight erosion, the cobble was covered.

“All of us grew up thinking that was just a sand beach,” Treuer said.

The Army Corps is conducting a [study\(https://duluthmn.gov/parks/parks-trails/current-projects/minnesota-point-section-111-study/\)](https://duluthmn.gov/parks/parks-trails/current-projects/minnesota-point-section-111-study/) on the effects of the breakwalls to Minnesota Point and potential solutions to damage attributed to them.



Volunteers and organizers walk on the beach after planting dune grass along Minnesota Point. Thirty-one people volunteered with the event. Dan Williamson / Duluth Media Group

So until that is complete, Treuer and Buck aren't sure what the permanent fix will be. Treuer doubts a hardened shoreline, like that of Canal Park and the Lakewalk, would be possible, and Buck wondered if a return to cobble to the north area of Minnesota Point, paired with some underwater barriers to slow waves, might help.

But, for the time being, the "Band-Aid" fix is better than nothing, Buck said. If nothing was done, Lake Superior risked breaching, or punching a hole through, the point's north end.

"Those homes are in peril, infrastructure is in peril," Buck said. "Park Point is a barrier island, and if the island goes away, then the harbor isn't protected by it."



Adam Fornear, Duluth Parks and Recreation specialist, walks while assisting volunteers along Minnesota Point. Dan Williamson / Duluth Media Group



Matt Doneux, of Duluth, poses with his son Wade Doneux, 7 months, while both volunteered with dune grass planting. Dan Williamson / Duluth Media Group



Volunteers and organizers walk on the beach after planting dune grass along Minnesota Point. Dan Williamson / Duluth Media Group



Billy Davis, a city of Duluth park maintenance employee, left, and Rebekah Johnson, a volunteer with Saline Landscaping Company, chat after planting dune grass along Minnesota Point. Dan Williamson / Duluth Media Group



Jim Shoberg, senior parks planner and landscape architect for the city of Duluth, right, chats after a dune grass planting event. Dan Williamson / Duluth Media Group

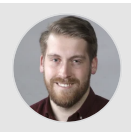
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