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## Moriches Inlet dredging scheduled

By Bryan Finlayson

A dredging project designed to replenish Smith Point Beach and guard against future storm surge may improve the health of the Forge River and Moriches Bay, according to officials and environmentalists.

The project calls for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to dredge at least 240,000 cubic yards of sand from the Moriches Inlet and transfer the sediment to Smith Point Beach. The Federal Emergency Management Agency agreed to fund the \$6.4 million project after a nor'easter tore up and eroded parts of Smith Point Beach in April. A massive amount of sand was washed away by the extreme winds and tides, putting the barrier beach in danger of being breached in future storms.

U.S. Representative Tim Bishop helped secure the federal funding.

"This is to re-open that very valuable inlet to recreationalists and the fishing industry," Mr. Bishop said. "We need to get sand on the beach at Smith Point Park."

Before April's nor'easter, the county had spent \$2.7 million to transfer 225,000 cubic yards of sand from an offshore location to the beach. Suffolk County Department of Public Works Chief Engineer Bill Hillman said the beach had been "badly eroded" by the storms.

Mr. Hillman said he hopes the dredging could begin as soon as this fall.

Areas expected to benefit from the project include a section of beach in front of the pavilion, the Flight 800 memorial and other spots east of the county park.

County officials said the project would be a win-win situation.

"We get our sand, the fishermen get an improved inlet," Mr. Hillman said.

The inlet was identified as an important place to dredge, in part because of shallowness that makes it a danger to boaters. Dredging the inlet will make it deeper, increasing safety, Peconic Baykeeper Kevin McAllister said.

"You gotta be careful in there," Mr. McAllister said of navigating the inlet. "You have to know what you're doing to get in and out of there safely."

Additionally, the project could help the embattled Forge River by opening it up to an increased tidal flow.

Residents living on the Forge River have complained of foul odors and unnatural fish kills in the river in recent years, caused in part by a lack of salt water flowing from the ocean into the bay and river.

Environmentalists think dredging the inlet could help improve water quality. More tidal flow, they say, would allow polluted water in the bay and river to escape into the ocean while it is replaced by incoming tides.

This circulation could improve fish life, which has dropped off severely in recent years, said Moriches Bay crabber Fred Chiofolo.

"It's affected everything," the 64-year-old said of the low tidal flow. "We haven't had scallops in Moriches Bay

for I don't know how long. The Peconic Bay was full of clams, but now if you find 10, you're lucky. You used to catch hundreds."

However, Department of Environmental Conservation Regional Director Peter Scully said he was skeptical that dredging the inlet would drastically improve conditions.

"It would have some beneficial effect, but it would likely be negligible," Mr. Scully said. "The river itself does not flush well."

Save The Forge River President Ron Lupski, who has called for dredging projects for years, argued that dredging the inlet will play a major role in improving the health of the oxygen-starved river.

"It goes from a green, then it dies off and goes to a brown," Mr. Lupski said of the troubled river. "It's nasty."

Dredging the inlet "is going to give us a better flush," Mr. Lupski added.

Both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Fire Island National Seashore initially opposed last year's \$2.7 million restoration project, but have agreed to support the current project, albeit reluctantly. The project eventually went forward last year after both the wildlife service and FINS agreed that there was an urgent need for the beach restoration.

The wildlife service argued that artificial dunes proposed in the project could impact piping plovers, an endangered species that nests on the beach. FINS officials, meanwhile, opposed the project last year because the offshore sand was believed to be of a lesser quality than existing Fire Island sand.

After saying he was aware of the current restoration proposal, Steve Papa, a senior endangered species biologist with the wildlife service, declined to comment on the project.

FINS Deputy Superintendent Sean McGuinness said inlet sand appears to be comparable to existing sand, but criticized the project because there is no comprehensive plan for the entire waterfront in place.

"I don't want to say, 'Yes, this is a great idea,'" Mr. McGuinness said. "But because there is a need to protect the beaches, we are in approval of the project."

The installation of a 45,000-foot-long fence, costing \$94,000, that would help to prevent dune erosion is also planned, according to Barbara Lynch, a spokeswoman for Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Suffolk County Legislator Kate Browning, whose district includes Smith Point Beach, said, "If we can accomplish improving the tidal flow by borrowing sand from the inlet, it would be a win-win for Smith Point Beach and the Forge River.

"The beach is a very well-used beach," she continued. "It has the Flight 800 Memorial, so we are going to have to keep it functioning—it's important that we maintain it."

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