



THE WATCH HILL CONSERVATOR
222 Watch Hill Road
Watch Hill, Rhode Island 02891

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THE WATCH HILL CONSERVANCY NEWSLETTER

FEBRUARY, 2013 VOL. 6 No. 1 WATCH HILL, R.I.

BEACH SPECIAL AREA MANAGEMENT PLAN

Sea level rise is no longer an abstract concept. Regardless of cause, climate change will have a significant impact upon the coastal zone. Scientists and government officials are now predicting that these impacts will be felt more often in the very near future and with increasing severity. Last fall's Hurricane Sandy is just one such example.

Apropos of wise coastal planning, the University of Rhode Island's School of Oceanography Coastal Resources Center is embarking this winter on a new multi-year project to develop a "Shoreline Change" or "Beach" Special Area Management Plan (also known as a SAMP). The first phase will cover the shoreline from Point Judith to Napatree. Such plans have been developed over the years for the fragile coastal ponds, Greenwich Bay (in Narragansett Bay), the Providence metro harborfront, and Rhode Island Sound. Spurred by the dramatic erosion of the beachfront in nearby Matunuck over the past decade and threats to public safety and the viability of exposed ocean-front portions of Matunuck village, the Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC), which regulates development in the state's coastal zones, is seeking expert guidance on options to create a more sustainable coastal development future – one that hopefully has the resiliency to survive sea level rise and storm events without catastrophic loss, continual re-investment, or state/federal bailouts. The planning effort will include stakeholder meetings in South County, possibly in South Kingstown and Westerly. It will pull technical and scientific analyses from various sources including Rhode Island state geologist Jon Boothroyd (who spoke about sea level rise and coastal erosion at our 2011 annual meeting). It will also include graphic images of the likely result of sea level rise, future erosion and storm inundations, and preferred future development scenarios.

Speaking for the effort, project manager Michelle Carnevale of the Coastal Resources Center said "we will be looking at shoreline change going back 50 years to the 1960s and evaluating how accurate predictions have been for beach and shoreline loss. We want to be sure we know what is actually happening with erosion and inundation so that we can be more accurate about future impact potential. Hence the science, mapping, and analysis will be critical to policy formation."

RCY



View west from Misquamicut to East Beach after Hurricane Sandy. Photo Charles Fisher

THE WATCH HILL CONSERVANCY
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For information about community events, lectures, concerts, nature walks, educational programs for children, and others, see the Conservancy's website below.

www.thewatchhillconservancy.org

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Celebration of Summer 2013

Saturday, June 29, 6-9 p.m.
Misquamicut Club Beach Club



Annual Meeting, Saturday, August 17, 5 pm,
Misquamicut Club (Golf)
Speaker, Peter V. August, Professor of Landscape Ecology, URI Department of Natural Resources Science, College of Environmental and Life Sciences

Fencing and erosion control

Storm damage at Napatree has raised the issue of storm fencing as a means of preventing erosion of the dunes. While the advantages of replacing or installing fencing may seem obvious, there are mixed consequences to the bird and wildlife population, and no easy solutions.

In the past, strategically-placed fencing has played an important role in protecting the dunes. It has served to direct foot traffic and reduce human intervention in grassy areas, and to keep sand and vegetation in place, maintaining a stable dune and providing a foothold for young grasses. Sandy destroyed some existing fencing, and left areas of the Point vulnerable to the degree that there is new discussion about whether or not to add fencing in new places in addition to replacing the lost fencing. Where should damaged fencing be replaced? Where should nature be allowed to literally take its course? Should any new fencing be installed?

Napatree is a significant nesting place for the endangered piping plover, a tiny bird that summers here and winters in the Caribbean. The Conservancy, Fire District, Audubon Society, and US Fish and Wildlife Service monitor the Point and track plover population. The numbers rise and fall for a variety of reasons, including predation and other factors that are difficult to control. When a nest is established, an enclosure may be erected around it to protect the eggs and chicks. Adults feed on both the ocean and bay sides of Napatree, requiring obstacle-free access similar to that on the beaches where they over-winter. New or replaced fencing could obstruct that access, creating a barrier between the birds, especially the chicks, and their food source or protective cover.

Although the storm has left Napatree with significantly less vegetation, Anne Hecht, national Atlantic Coastal Piping Plover Coordinator for the Fish and Wildlife Service, is delighted with the creation of new nesting habitat for plovers (as well as for least terns). This habitat provides easy access from desirable nesting locations to feeding areas at the water's edge. Both Susi von Oettingen, USFWS Endangered Species Biologist, and Hecht believe that dune fencing could inhibit the birds' (especially chicks') access to their food source or cover. A bird that hesitates to walk through the fence slats increases the opportunity to become prey for predators such as crows, which could perch and wait for dinner.



The stewards of Napatree are eager to allow natural dune build-up wherever possible, and to limit human interference with that process, while avoiding any adverse impact on the plovers. Consequently, they will be working with the Service to seek its guidance on where cross-over paths for foot traffic can be delineated by limited sand fencing, and identified by appropriate signage.

Plovers are not the only inhabitants of Napatree. Skunk, deer, red fox, opossum, mink, and rabbit, as well as many species of birds, live there either seasonally or year-round. What impact does the presence or absence of fencing have on those segments of the population?

Fencing serves to direct humans and other animals away from the most vulnerable areas and occupants. Those animals can find their way around an obstruction. Plovers are more vulnerable. Von Oettingen maintains that "the discussion focuses on plovers because they are federally protected and we are seeking to avoid adverse impacts to them. We are all working to protect them and the beach from unmanageable recreational use. We are looking at how to use sand fencing that will avoid impacts to habitat, minimize impacts from human traffic, and protect the beach. Symbolic fencing, such as posts and ropes, may help to direct traffic without detriment to the plovers' freedom of movement." In essence, the question of where to place fencing – and what kind – is as critical as where *not* to place it.

Janice Sassi, Napatree Point Conservation Area Manager, observes that another important consideration is the revegetation of the dune grass (*Ammophila*). "Dune grass spreads by sending out 'runners' under the sand. This means that clumps of shoots are actually connected to each other. People walking on the grass break these runners, causing connected plants to die." A look at Napatree clearly illustrates the important role of dune protection. Where there was fencing, the dunes were less affected by the storm because vegetation held the sand in place. Where there was no fencing and wide, well-used paths cross the dune, the ocean cut out large sections. These open areas are particularly vulnerable to overwash in a strong storm. "Given that Napatree Point Conservation Area's primary mission is environmental protection, we are weighing solutions to these questions in terms of accommodating thousands of beach goers. We want them to easily locate crossover areas, especially if they arrive by boat, to enable them to moor near their destination."

Management of Napatree is a constant effort to balance preservation of sensitive habitat with a commitment to maintaining public access in ways that inflict the least amount of damage. Storms such as Sandy remind us that the struggle is on-going, and only becomes more complicated over time. Each major storm that changes the landscape and the eco-systems by eroding beaches and dunes sends conservationists and stewards back to the table for discussion of how to maintain that balance. The Conservancy is confident that solutions will be found that acknowledge and address all sides of the question. JY, CB, JS



Photos this page
Richard C. Youngken

Conservancy Board Formally Commits to Completion of \$5+ Million Bay Street Utility Infrastructure Project

Completion in 2014

In October, 2012 the Conservancy Board of Directors took long-hoped-for action to approve the final phase of its six-year-long effort to relocate the utility infrastructure underground in the Watch Hill Bay Street business district. Specifically involved was formal Board approval to enter into construction contracts for the removal of overhead wires, transformers, and utility poles, and the relocation of service underground.

The project began with detailed engineering studies initiated in 2006-2007, and, at a cost of more than \$2 million, has included, in two phases of construction, the installation of utility duct banks in Fort Road, Bay Street, and Larkin Road, and the relocation of utilities underground in Fort Road. Work in 2012 was accomplished in conjunction with the Town of Westerly's replacement of the water main on Bay Street and its installation of stormwater drainage infrastructure.

Over the years, it became clear to all involved that what had begun with aesthetic aspirations and the motive of improving safety in a flood-prone area has the potential to revive the business district and contribute to the economic development of Watch Hill, Westerly, and the surrounding area. Completion of the project, which had always been dependent on funding, was, at a cost of more than another \$3.5 million, by no means assured as of mid-2012.

In the summer of 2012, the Board launched a major new funding effort, the Campaign to Revitalize Bay Street, and the Alfred M. Roberts, Jr. Charitable Foundation determined to match funds raised, dollar-for-dollar. While full funding has yet to be secured, on the strength of these efforts and commitments, the Board made the decision to move ahead on a schedule that will lead to completion in 2014.

As of the end of January, progress has been made to connect from the new Bay Street duct bank to end-user meter locations. By May, all work in the public way will be completed. In the fall, transformer pads will be installed on private properties. National Grid, Cox, and Verizon will then pull the underground cables, energize the new underground system, and remove the poles in 2014.

The Town of Westerly is planning to undertake the restoration of Bay Street by means of a state transportation grant. That work will include granite curbing, sidewalks, and final road paving and is expected to be completed prior to summer 2014. The Conservancy will be responsible for the installation of new street lighting.



Before

Photo Richard C. Youngken



During

Photo Richard C. Youngken



The future

Artwork by Ardi Schneider

MEMBERSHIP FORM

The Watch Hill Conservancy is a non-profit organization. Your membership supports the protection of the natural and cultural resources of Watch Hill, a variety of programs, and educational publications, including this newsletter.

Member name: _____

Preferred mailing address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

INDIVIDUAL: \$25

No: ____ Total: \$ _____

BUSINESS: \$100

No: ____ Total: \$ _____

FAMILY: \$100

No: ____ Total: \$ _____

SUPPORTER: \$250 - \$499

No: ____ Total: \$ _____

SPONSOR: \$500 - \$999

No: ____ Total: \$ _____

PATRON: \$1,000 - \$2,499

No: ____ Total: \$ _____

BENEFACTOR: \$2,500 - \$5,000 or more

No: ____ Total: \$ _____

OTHER CONTRIBUTION Total: \$ _____

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Please include names of family members 18 and under. If you are making gifts of memberships, please include the names and addresses of those to receive these gifts.



NAPATREE NOTES

At this early stage we are getting excited about the 2013 season! We are working hard planning our calendar of events and conservation strategy with the help of our Science Advisors, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, URI Watershed Watch, and many others who appreciate Napatree's unique ecological importance.

Mark these events on your calendar:

On Saturday, March 23rd, at 9:00 a.m. we will begin the year with our annual cleanup. Even though we had a post-storm cleanup on November 10th, debris continues to come ashore. Volunteers of all ages are welcome. We will meet at the entrance to Napatree next to the Misquamicut Club Beach Club. Rain or snow date: Saturday, March 30th.

On June 1st we open registration for our very popular free children's program, the Napatree Investigators, which will be offered Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday mornings from July 9th to August 29th from 8:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. Children from ages seven to fourteen are invited to attend a session each week led by Pine Point School Science Chair, Stephen Brown, and co-taught by Warwick High School teacher, Hugh Markey. Sessions will focus on different beach and marine topics. This series fills up quickly, so early registration is suggested. Contact Napatreenaturalist@live.com starting June 1st.

On June 15, we will host the first of our weekly Saturday walks on Napatree led by naturalists Hugh Markey and Steve Brown. The walks start from the Napatree entrance at 9:00 a.m., weather permitting. Watch for special walks led by guest experts!

To receive an email of our calendar, please contact Napatreenaturalist@live.com



Piping Plover

Photos this page Janice Sassi

Sightings:

The pipit, aka water pipit, photographed on Napatree in September, arrives on Napatree in the fall from the Arctic where it summers and breeds. It is a sparrow-like bird with a distinctive way of bobbing its tail up and down. Just as the arrival of our ospreys and plovers mean spring, the arrivals of the Brant eider (mentioned in previous issues) and the American pipit are a sure sign of fall and winter.

In October, the remains of a dead sea turtle washed up on East Beach. Interestingly, Hurricane Sandy relocated it inland on the western portion of Napatree. Naturalist Jessica Cressman observed an opossum feeding on the carcass and set up a motion-activated "critter cam" to photograph wildlife activity at pre-set times, providing another method of identifying who is living on Napatree.

The Ruddy Turnstone, photographed in early December, is a gorgeous bird whose bright orange legs help to identify it. It is usually seen flipping over small stones searching for food, hence its name. It breeds in the Arctic, but its migration range extends all along the eastern coast of the United States.



Ruddy Turnstone

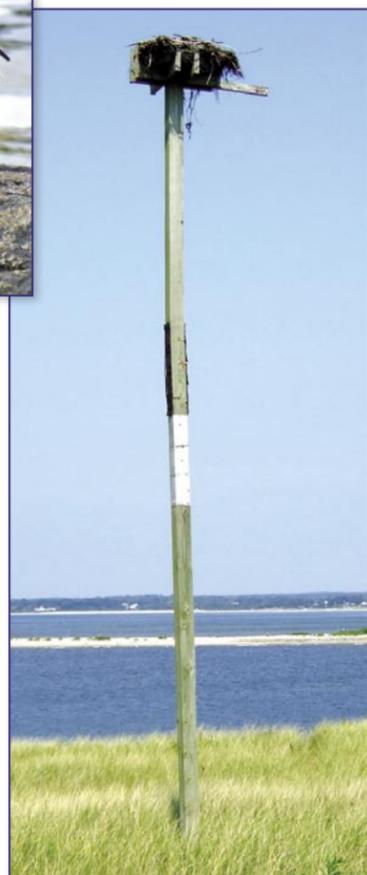
In the coming weeks, watch for the return of ospreys, piping plovers, and oystercatchers. Our ospreys will return mid-March and start repairing their nest, carrying long sticks to the top of the pole. Last year, we saw a plover nest as early as mid-April, and American oystercatchers at about the same time on Sandy Point. JS



Oystercatchers



Pipit



NEWS & NOTES

Watch Hill Lighthouse

The Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Association is grateful to be able to report on the progress that has been made to the property since Hurricane Sandy. With the ready response of several local contractors, Lighthouse Road was cleared within days, the boulders and debris were removed from the lawn, and the exposed areas at the point were secured with fill and granite. The fencing around the perimeter of the property was replaced just after Thanksgiving weekend, and we were able to open the area to the public once again. Minor damage to the structures has been repaired as well. At present, we are conducting engineering surveys to determine how best to complete the two remaining projects: the proper placement of boulders at the point and along the rear wall of the Lighthouse Museum, and the rebuilding of the seawall. The latter remains our primary concern as continual nor'easters, particularly the two that hit during the full moon just after Christmas, continue to erode the remaining section of wall and, with the accompanying rising tide, render Lighthouse Road temporarily impassable. We anticipate initiating reconstruction of the seawall by spring, following the completion and review of the surveying reports and subsequent hiring of contractors.

Though we await word from FEMA as to federal funding, the expenses for repairs have been borne by the Association, and thus we are enormously appreciative of the support of the community. Particular gratitude is extended to the Roberts Foundation whose recent grant to the Association is assisting in funding the surveying reports and subsequent rebuilding of the seawall. We look forward to opening the Museum in early July, but welcome visitors now to enjoy the Lighthouse in these chilly but often stunning and quiet winter days.

Ann Snowden Johnson
President, WHLKA



Photo ©2012 Katherine Johnson Photography



Photo Richard C. Youngken

Recent Conservancy Land Acquisitions

The August 2012 issue of the *Conservator* reported on the gift to the Conservancy from Jeanne and John Blasberg of "Taylor Island," located in the Pawcatuck River. That article prompted the Blasbergs' neighbors, Ellen and Robert Murray, to make a similar gift of their small island, which is part of the same geological formation. Conveyed to the Conservancy in September, it will be known as "North Taylor Island." We are deeply grateful for the gift.

A further gift was made in October by Deborah and Peter Lamm of a property interest in the East Beach lot known as the "Sand Dunes," located in the Manatuck Avenue area of the beach. This increases the Conservancy's prior ownership interest in the lot, of which the Watch Hill Fire District is also an owner. We very much appreciate this additional gift.

Boating Post-Sandy

All reports indicate that there will be no significant change in recreational boating access in the wake of Hurricane Sandy. While the ocean over-washed Napatree and sand was deposited on the bay side, the result may be only marginally shallower conditions within the bayside anchoring areas. Watch Hill Cove and harbor were affected when the dunes at the Watch Hill Yacht Club cabanas were washed across Fort Road and into the harbor. All of the sand has been removed and placed back on the beach in an effort to re-establish the dunes.

Stonington Land Trust to acquire easements on Davis Farm

The Stonington Land Trust has recently committed to the purchase of conservation easements on 168 acres of the historic Davis Farm off Greenhaven Road in Stonington. The land is broken into two parcels: 120 acres adjacent to the Barn Island Wildlife Management Area, and 48 acres along the Pawcatuck River estuary across from Watch Hill's Pasadena and Breen Roads. Acquiring conservation easements on these parcels will complete preservation of this very significant historic property which dates to the 17th century and the roots of colonial settlement in the area. The Davis family, owners of the farmland, has previously committed farm acreage to conservation. The Davis Farm is reputed to be the oldest continuously-worked farm in Connecticut. Originally acquired by Thomas Stanton Sr. in the mid-17th century, it survives with an intact and architecturally significant ca. 1670 farmhouse (owned separately by the Stanton-Davis Homestead Museum, Inc.), which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The \$2 million commitment negotiated for the conservation easements purchase will require fund-raising over the next three years.

With this acquisition, historic natural vistas from Watch Hill will be preserved. The property is visible from Pasadena Avenue and Breen and Avondale Roads, as well as from Napatree, the Village, and areas north along the Rhode Island shore. The Conservancy commends the Land Trust for this forward-thinking initiative.

Town of Westerly Post-Sandy: Sewers, Town Beach Facilities, and Canal Street

Three matters involving recent Town action and/or consideration are of interest as municipal responses to storm hazard mitigation.

The first relates to a portion of Misquamicut abutting the Watch Hill Fire District. As presented at the January 7 meeting of the Town Council, the Town is revisiting the issue of sewers in Misquamicut. As agreed at the time, last fall, when the Council rejected the sewer proposal then before it, the Council has appointed a new Committee to study sewer issues. Immediately upon their appointment they were asked by counsel representing a group of business owners, including owners of the Andrea Hotel, the Pleasant View Inn, and WH Properties (which owns two motels in the area), to consider approving a private sewer line to serve a small portion of Misquamicut, including portions of Atlantic Avenue and Winnapaug Road.

The Council also heard reports from the Public Works Committee and the Town Engineer and Recreation Director as to options for repair and rebuilding of the heavily-damaged bathing structures at both old and new Town beaches. There appeared to be consensus that portions of the buildings formerly built in the dunes would not be rebuilt there and that the buildings themselves should be moved back from the shore (into the parking lots) and rebuilt to code, and that the dune line should be restored, but landward of where it was. Details and plans are to be further developed and reviewed over coming weeks. Whether or not construction can be finished in time for the 2013 season, the Council agreed that the beaches themselves would be fully available to the public by Memorial Day.

Finally, the Town has been granted \$1.1 million FEMA hazard mitigation funding to acquire property on Canal Street ravaged by the 2010 floods but also impacted by Sandy. The structures on eight parcels will be demolished and the land will become wetlands and open space. Together with a parcel in the immediate area previously acquired with Department of Environmental Management open space funds, the properties amount to four acres with 1,500 ft. of frontage along the Pawcatuck River. The area will be known as the River Center and will provide river access.

Rebuilding after catastrophic storms: how will regulations protect historic structures?

Watch Hill's beloved Merry-Go-Round, arguably the most significant historic structure in the Village, has survived more than a century of hurricanes, severe storms, and flooding. Tucked into the gentle topography at the end of Bay Street, it has seemed impervious to the waters that have flooded nearby areas. Hurricane Sandy was a dramatic reminder that things are changing. Luckily, the Merry-Go-Round survived intact, but the beach lockers, beach, and portions of Larkin Square just within a few feet were damaged, raising new concerns about future inundations of Bay Street during ocean storms. Wind damage on both higher and lower elevations is also a concern. With the inevitability of severe storms – more frequent and damaging than in the past – will possibilities for recovery within Watch Hill's historic district change? Do strategies and regulations, designed in response to changing sea levels, support the public's commitment to protecting historic buildings and structures along the waterfront and on the hill?



124 Bay Street, Watch Hill. The building's "break-away" first floor walls are indistinguishable from the street. Photo Richard C. Youngken

In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy and the frenzy to rebuild in time for the 2013 summer season, some review and permitting constraints have been removed or streamlined if the cost of repair to a building or structure is less than 50% of its value and if it can be rebuilt as it was before the storm. For properties within the Watch Hill Historic District and listed in the National Register of Historic Places, this means that the normally protective design review undertaken by RI Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) may be fast-tracked following future storms. Likewise, National Register-listed properties receiving Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) emergency relief funding may also be fast-tracked through the review by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, a clearing house for such reviews, provided that the properties can be restored to their pre-storm livability. While no historic buildings in Watch Hill appear to have been damaged by Sandy, these regulations may impact restoration of the historic district following future catastrophic storms, whether damage is from flood or wind.

If current guidelines for restoration are compromised during streamlined recovery, historic properties may be in jeopardy of being demolished or rebuilt beyond recognition. In a time-sensitive post-storm rebuilding campaign, FEMA will fund private and public projects only to an amount not covered by the property's insurance. One must exhaust one's insurance before receiving FEMA funds. If the property has no private insurance whatsoever, FEMA may be able to assist in rebuilding, but only to a minimum level that allows the building to be inhabited or used, not completely refurbished, rebuilt, or redeveloped. Consequently, even a combination of private insurance and FEMA funding does not guarantee full recovery of even the most significant buildings.

FEMA will fund projects in communities which participate and qualify under the Federal Flood Insurance program. Such communities must enforce compliance with building codes that provide for flood-proofing of buildings and structures within flood hazard areas mapped on official Flood Hazard Insurance Rate (FIRM) maps. These maps are regularly updated to show possible flood elevations in storm conditions and areas that are in flood velocity or storm surge zones. Such flood zones have been developed to help protect lives and minimize property damage as much as possible. Should a building suffer damage that requires repairs costing more than 50% of its value, under FEMA-accepted local building codes, the building must be rebuilt to meet all of the flood code requirements. In the case of restoration of a severely damaged historic building, this may be cause for concern in instances where retaining historic elements is at odds with new regulations.

On the surface, flood-proofing requirements might appear to be insensitive to historic buildings. To meet the flood-proofing design standards, generally only first floor ground-level commercial uses are allowed in flood hazard zones, with residential use allowed on upper floors above the flood hazard elevation. The first floors of new buildings and those that have been substantially renovated must allow storm surge water to pass through the ground level with collapsible "break-away" exterior walls and windows. While Bay Street lies along the harbor in a flood zone, its first floor uses are generally commercial retail or office and, if necessary, first floor building exteriors can be renovated for break-away walls to accommodate future flood surges. The new building at 124 Bay Street (at the corner of Bay Street and Larkin Road) has a traditional commercial front in the style of the rest of Bay Street with break-away exterior walls.

Residences may be built in flood zones provided living spaces are built above the flood elevation on pilings or stilts. Hence new houses in flood hazard areas are built high in the air with their living spaces well above ground level. In concept, flood waters will be able to pass freely through the lower level of these houses while the foundation piers and upper floors remain intact. Unfortunately, only the cleverest designers are successful in crafting new houses that appear to fit into the landscape and the surrounding neighborhood while meeting flood code constraints. Many architecture critics are concerned that this new style, imposed by the flood regulations, either walls off the shoreline or creates rectangular mini-towers in the landscape, juxtaposed to lower-profile, often historic, buildings that have been tested over time by many a coastal storm. However, with dramatic sea level rise predicted in the next 50 years, the design standard for sustainability is changing and a new coastal vernacular style is emerging de facto.

Fortunately for Watch Hill's National Register-listed houses and commercial buildings, as long as they remain standing, the building codes allow for flexibility in meeting the flood hazard requirements to enable the historical character-defining features of the buildings to be retained if at all possible and still provide for safety concerns. In this way, the interest in preserving the historic character of Watch Hill need not be in conflict with accommodating flood situations or sea level rise. Many of Watch Hill's impor-

tant historic houses were built in elevated positions and are not at risk, but some are located in lower lying flood hazard zones, particularly on the west side of the district.

Rebuilding in Watch Hill after a major storm may result in changes to the visual character of the shoreline. However, the National Register status of Watch Hill ensures that some flexibility within the building code is allowed for designs that complement rather than detract. In addition, designs for reconstruction and new buildings along Bay Street must meet the dimensional and architectural review standards of the Westerly Zoning Code for this area, which require building architecturally-compatible designs. Any properties receiving federal relief funds or permits from the CRMC will also be reviewed by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission for compatibility and visual impact.

Rebuilding properties that have been substantially damaged and require investing more than 50% of their value will require meeting costly flood-proofing building codes to retain flood insurance coverage. Hopefully, the market system will dictate the cost-effectiveness of rebuilding such properties. While it may make sense to repair storm-damaged historic properties in some coastal areas where they are reasonably protected by traditional siting practices on higher ground, whether or not it makes any sense to repeatedly rebuild substantially damaged non-historic properties in increasingly vulnerable coastal beach locations such as Matunuck and Misquamicut remains for further discussion. Such discussion could occur during the formulation of the Rhode Island Shoreline Change Special Area Management Plan (SAMP) due to begin with public informational meetings in March. (See related article page 1.) RCY

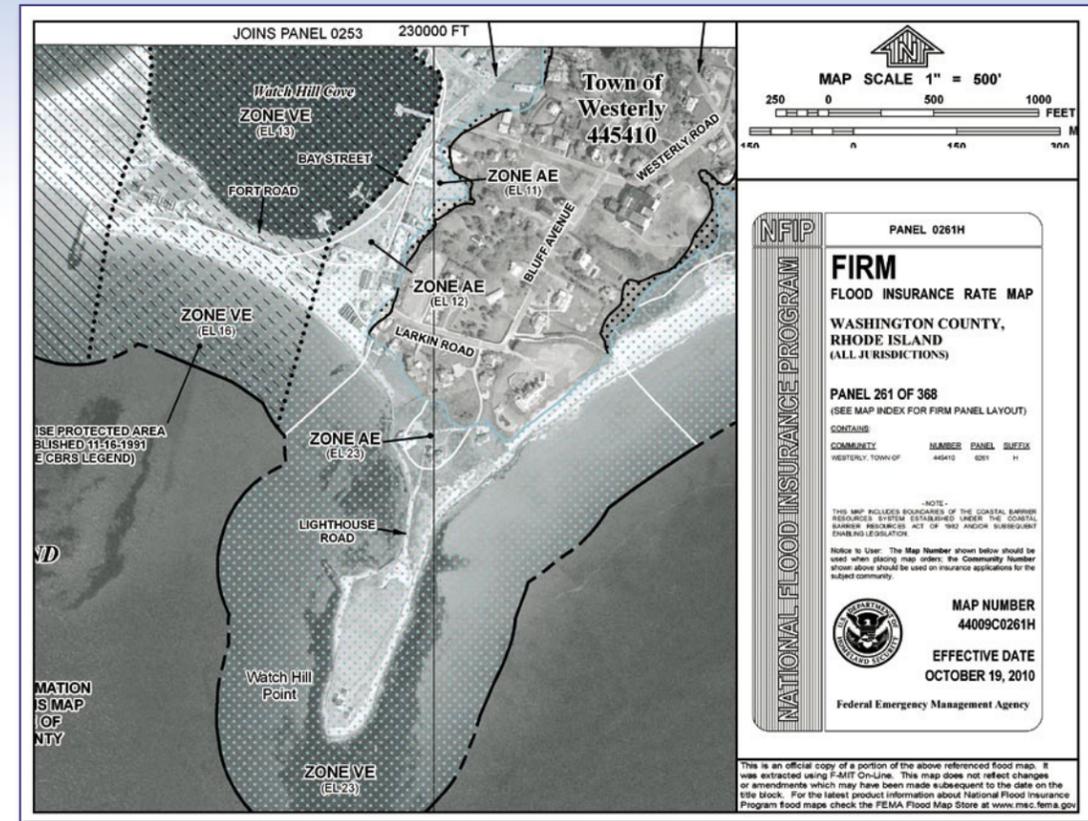


Photo Joan Youngken