

ALEX BEAM

A tale of two beaches

The Boston Globe

By Alex Beam, Globe Columnist | September 13, 2006

Here is one of the great non-stories of the early 21st century: The beach at Siasconset, in Nantucket, home to the meta-rich and the members-only Sankaty Head golf and beach club, is washing into the ocean. So far Neptune has claimed five homes, nine have been moved elsewhere on the island, and seven have been moved farther back on their lots.

Yes, this is the part of Nantucket where homeowners have big lots. In fact, the tiny enclave cowering from the waves, populated by families named Roosevelt and Hostetter, is said to represent somewhere in the neighborhood of 5 percent of the island's tax base. That's a mighty nice neighborhood!

Frankly, my dear, we don't give a darn. The rich people have passed the hat among themselves and come up with \$20 million (in cash, or in diamond-encrusted Rolexes?) for a beach restoration project. So they don't want our money, they're not asking for sympathy, and they're not courting publicity.

But here's the rub. The plutocrats of Siasconset won't get their beach back until the working-class town of Winthrop gets its beach and seafront back. Severe beach erosion has caused flooding in about one-third of Winthrop, at times affecting as many 5,000 residents. So as goes Winthrop, so goes Nantucket.

Alas, Winthrop hasn't been going well at all. Even though the townspeople have got some juice -- both House Ways and Means Committee chairman Robert DeLeo and Senate president Robert Travaglini are in their corner -- and the required budget commitments, they've spent seven long years waiting for a new beach. And the horizon keeps receding. "We're not getting the respect that Nantucket might get because they're a more worldly community," explains beachfront resident and member of the Winthrop Citizens Action Committee Cheryl Tobey. "We can't move our houses anywhere. We're a working-class town; we don't have room to move anything."

Both towns want to scoop sand and gravel from the ocean bed and dump them on their depleted shores. Six local and state agencies have OK'd the Winthrop project; in the bureaucracy, the Division of Marine Fisheries and more recently the National Marine Fisheries Service oppose it. In clear, easy-to-understand language, e.g. "note that Section 305(b)(4)(B) of the MSA requires the ACOE to provide NMFS with a detailed written response," the fisheries types say that scooping from the ocean bottom will harm at least 20 species of fish. "It's a question of balancing the public interests of flood control and fish protection," says NMFS spokeswoman Teri Frady.

Proponents of the two projects point out that many similar restorations have taken place in New Jersey and Florida with no lasting harm to our finny friends. And respect for fisheries regulators isn't exactly at flood tide. "These are, after all, the people who allowed every major New England fish stock to crash," snipes one consultant.

The Nantucket types have retained former regional EPA administrator John DeVillars to work some regulatory magic in Washington. Here's my question: Isn't it time to play the K card? Senator Ted Kennedy seems to rule the waves in his back yard, as the backers of the Cape Cod wind farm are finding out the hard way. Winthrop has caught the attention of Representative Ed Markey. Maybe he and Senator Kennedy can line up the necessary relief for the citizens of Winthrop, and for the beleaguered golfers of Siasconset.

Apropos

Illustrator Eli Cooper recently sent me his latest book, ``Beach." (You can look at it and his other works at <http://www.elishacooper.com/> .) He's drawing a city beach, the stretch of the Lake Michigan shoreline where he likes to go jogging. ``I look at this book as a Chicago book (the lighthouse is a lighthouse at the head of the Chicago River), which makes odd sense to me," Cooper writes. ``Because even a city beach on a lake has the essential things that make a beach a beach: a place to lie on one's back and look at the clouds, to listen to seagulls, to watch people walk past in ridiculous swimsuits. A place where sand and water meet."

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