

Losing Ground Erosion is Threatening Long Island's Historic Communities



This 2022 photo shows the eroding bluff within feet of the village tennis courts at the country club in Port Jefferson. Credit: GEI Consultants Inc. P.C. Newsday, February 26, 2024.

By Elizabeth Singer

Climate change poses an existential threat not just to our present but also to our past. Historical sites along our coastlines, markers of our collective memory and achievements, and sources of regional pride, now face unprecedented risks from rising sea levels and intensified storm events. The plight of the Port Jefferson Country Club along East Beach in my home town on Long Island Sound serves as a vivid illustration of this emerging crisis. Perched on an eroding bluff, this historic site embodies the challenges that many such communities across the nation are facing. This public site is home to the largest public waterfront space in the Village and, for all practical purposes, the only one available for community events.

In 1980, the small Village of Port Jefferson on the North Shore of Long Island decided to save their beloved country club, established in 1908, by purchasing it for \$2.29 million. Little did they know that two decades later, they would begin a seemingly endless battle over what to do with a country club that was slowly succumbing to the Long Island Sound. Despite considerable investment, including a multi-million-dollar stabilization project funded in part by FEMA, the bluff at East Beach continues to erode. The local efforts, laudable in their intent, have unfortunately only provided temporary respite. Storms, increasingly fierce and frequent, relentlessly undermine these defenses. The village took out a \$10 million bond to build a double-wall system stabilization project, celebrating the completion of phase one—a 240-foot-long steel and concrete wall—in the spring of 2023. However, the wall did not survive the following winter

intact. The town remains hopeful that they will be awarded a \$3.75 million FEMA Grant this year to help offset costs.

The situation at Port Jefferson is not an isolated one; it is a stark example of a larger, looming catastrophe facing coastal heritage sites worldwide. The question now facing Port Jefferson, and by extension all communities with similar heritage sites, is profound: How do we save these irreplaceable cultural landmarks? Is it more cost-effective to relocate such structures, preserving them physically but altering their historical context and connection to the landscape—and, in doing so, removing the public benefit made possible by their current, beach-front location? Or should we persist in our efforts to defend them at their original sites, even as nature inexorably reclaims these lands?

Relocation, though costly and complex, offers a tangible solution to preserve the physical integrity of historic sites. Yet, this approach also strips these places of their contextual authenticity, potentially diminishing their historical value and significance. On the other hand, continuing to fight the advancing sea seems increasingly impractical, a costly endeavor with diminishing returns that may only delay the inevitable.

The dilemma faced at Port Jefferson reflects broader challenges in coastal management and historic preservation under the shadow of climate change. Traditional methods such as seawalls, groins, and bulkheads—though providing immediate relief—are proving inadequate and unsustainable over the long term. These structures often lead to increased erosion elsewhere and disrupt natural sediment flows, causing further environmental damage.

This realization has spurred interest in alternative, more sustainable approaches like living shorelines. These methods use natural materials and vegetation to stabilize the coast, not only protecting against erosion but also enhancing biodiversity and supporting the health of coastal ecosystems. However, while living shorelines present a promising solution, they require careful, scientific planning and significant initial investment.

Moreover, the issue of preserving our coastal heritage isn't just a local concern but a national challenge, demanding a coordinated response from both public and private sectors. Local taxpayers and small municipalities lack the resources to tackle these problems alone. It's imperative that state and federal agencies, along with private philanthropy and corporate social responsibility initiatives, come together to fund and implement solutions that transcend local boundaries and provide sustainable preservation strategies.

Governmental agencies typically step in post-disaster; however, there is a pressing need for these bodies to engage proactively. They must provide not only emergency relief but also fund and support long-term planning efforts that include community input and robust scientific research. This proactive approach should aim to anticipate future challenges rather than merely reacting to immediate crises.

For regions like Long Island, which are both rich in coastal historical sites and particularly vulnerable to coastal erosion and climate impacts, the stakes are even higher. The local geography and frequent nor'easters contribute to significant land loss annually. The response to these challenges needs to be proactive and innovative. Projects such as restoring marshes and wetlands, and building dunes to absorb storm surges, must be part of an integrated strategy that balances environmental sustainability with cultural preservation.

As we confront these challenges, it's crucial to recognize that our efforts today will define the legacy we leave for future generations. The choices we make in preserving our historical sites—whether through relocation, innovative coastal defenses, or a combination of both—will determine how history remembers us. Just as importantly, these decisions will decide what remains of our past for future generations to learn from and appreciate.

In the end, the preservation of places like Port Jefferson Country Club isn't just about saving a single site from erosion; it's about how we, as a society, choose to remember and honor our shared heritage in the face of an uncertain, changing world. It's a call to action for all stakeholders involved—from government officials and scientists to local communities and global corporations—to forge partnerships that will protect and preserve our historical waterfront buildings and landscapes for centuries to come.