

Man vs. nature on the Sconset Bluff

To the Editor: In the wake of last week's March blizzard, we are reminded once again of both the beauty of Nantucket and the unique challenges of life on an island. The awesome forces of nature are to be respected. At the same time, there are steps we can and should take to preserve the precious landscapes of Nantucket.

Nowhere is this balance more evident than beloved Sconset Beach. For some time, property owners near the beach have been working to find a solution that protects our community in a respectful way. I am pleased to report that the geotubes installed on an emergency basis over the winter performed well and the impact of the most recent storm was limited.

Not surprisingly, the approval process for an erosion protection project on the Sconset Bluff has been complex. A recap of recent events highlights both positive progress and that more needs to be done: Last spring erosion from a bad winter forced town officials to begin planning for closing of Baxter Road and creating new access to the homes in that area (for public-safety reasons), cutting off access to Sankaty Lighthouse and a dozen homes. The available options for doing so were costly, controversial and required private land taking.

The Siasconset Beach Preservation Fund (SBPF) stepped forward and proposed a public-private partnership with the town to protect the bluff at its own expense so the road could remain open. The Board of Selectmen agreed and we suggested two approaches (originally a 4,000 foot-long rock revetment – considered a longer-term fix – and subsequently a geotube project).

When the Conservation Commission (ConCom) chose not to approve either idea, we filed an emergency-certification request, concerned that winter erosion would be irreparable. Though the Conservation Commission rejected that request, an appeal to the state resulted in a compromise plan and an emergency permit allowed the geotube project to move forward in late December and January.

We are now asking the Con-Com to consider the original application for the geotube project via a normal (non-emergency) process. The project we have outlined is designed to withstand a 150-plus-year storm. There are some small changes to the emergency proposal that will include stronger "returns" on both ends to minimize scour, the addition of the top geotube, and permission to plant the upper part of the bluff so it does not erode from wind and rain now that the toe of the bluff has been protected.

The ConCom made no decisions at its March 19 meeting, a delay that probably closed the window for planting the bluff face in the most effective way.

In the midst of the confusion we hope islanders remember a few basic points:

- This project is privately funded, designed and constructed to high professional standards, and will save the town from significant expenses.
- The project includes an annual delivery of sand to the bluff by truck, in a way that limits local impact to a week or so probably divided into two delivery periods during the winter months. Beaches in front and up and down drift will get the same or greater amount of sand during storms and otherwise that they would have without a project, ensuring that the project will have no negative impact on Nantucket's beaches.
- The project assures continued beach access. Even in an unusual storm, when winds cause waves to wash up to the toe of the protection system, beach walkers can easily pass up the sides and over the top of the sand template.
- In addition to protecting a beach and bluff we love, SBPF wants to promote good citizenship and demonstrate pragmatic, environmentally sensitive solutions that can help preserve Nantucket's vulnerable shorefront communities threatened by sea-level rise. We have been dismayed and disheartened by those who call us selfish and who will not consider a rational conversation about the benefits of this approach.

We look forward to a continued constructive dialogue with our community on this project and hope that the initial benefits will help demonstrate that this project should go forward on a permanent basis. JOSH POSNER 77 Baxter Road President, Siasconset Beach Preservation Fund 4/3/14