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Project will change profile of Long Beach Island beaches

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(Published: January 21, 2006)

Hundreds of thousands of people will ascend the dunes of Long Beach Island in the coming years after taking their usual seasonal hiatus from the island. What they see will surprise them.

To many, it will be like seeing an old acquaintance who got a drastic makeover.

This is the Long Beach Island Project, a 50-year-plus plan to replenish and maintain the island's beaches. In the initial stage of the project, the Army Corps of Engineers will completely remake the beaches to protect oceanfront homes from continued erosion.

State officials said they expect to begin the project in earnest sometime this year in either Ship Bottom or Surf City.

The following is an analysis of the plans and what they have in store:

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Long Beach Island's beaches extend, in most places, about 100 feet from the palisade fences that guard the dunes to the ocean's edge. This is the area of beach featured in countless artist renderings, portraits and family photo albums. It's the place where children have made sand castles and buried their sleeping relatives for decades.

It is the place where you pitch your umbrella and lay out a blanket to catch some rays.

When the Army Corps is finished, the beaches will be about 200 feet wide and exist in a different place.

Currently Long Beach Island beaches begin - in most places - with a series of 18-foot-high dunes. The Army Corps plans to add an average of about four feet to their top, making them about 22 feet high.

Portions of the island's current dune network rise to 21 or 22 feet in height, according to officials. Most notably the dunes in Ship Bottom near 11th and 12th street are this height. The Army Corps will do little to change the height of these dunes.

But the length and breadth of the dunes will drastically change.

The Army Corps plans to widen these dunes to the point where the ocean now meets the foot of the sand. Effectively, all of Long Beach Island's current beaches will be buried under sand, the bottom becoming the buttress of a single massive dune.

This single, massive dune will represent an enormous barrier with an average width of 140 feet, according to Long Beach Township Engineer Frank Little. This new dune will be able to withstand even the most violent storms, he said.

Then the Army Corps will build a whole new beach.

It will pump millions of metric tons of sand into the water, pushing back the ocean, creating a new beach that will extend from the base of the new dunes about 200 feet into the ocean.

There are some things to consider.

Long Beach Island's beaches naturally descend at an angle. When the Army Corps is finished, they will be a mostly level plane.

The Army Corps intends to construct a pathway over the newly constructed dunes for easy entrance to the new beaches. The new dunes will rise at a grade of one foot in height per every five feet of length, plans show.

Some residents have expressed concern over potential difficulty of ascending the new dunes, but Little said not to worry.

"It's going to be a very gradual slope. The slope that exists now on some beaches is twice as steep as what the Army Corps plans," he said.

Little compared the new beaches to the ones that now exist at the southern portion of Barnegat Light. "Not the ones in the northerly area (of Barnegat Light) where the jetty is," Little said. Barnegat Light is the only island municipality not participating in the project.

Every area in Long Beach Island, however, will be treated differently, according to the plans. The Army Corps of Engineers has tailored its design to the natural intricacies of each portion of beachfront. The changes described here represent a general template referenced in the beginning of the Army Corps' plans.

Residents should request to see the plans at the various city halls on Long Beach Island to see what the corps has in store for their own beaches.

The Army Corps of Engineers has already replenished a three-block-long area in Harvey Cedars. This tiny fraction of the project was completed in November. Today, it is barely noticeable that any work was done. The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection said this portion of the project was not done to the specifications of the Army Corps' plan and this is the reason for today's almost unchanged appearance.

It was not clear Friday why this three-block stretch of beach was not sculpted to the corps' plans.

Township Engineer Frank Little said he has fielded between 60 and 100 telephone calls from residents interested in the Army Corps profile.

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