

Shore resort finds WWII munitions, hopes beaches open on time

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You can't blame people in Surf City for feeling a bit shell-shocked this spring.

The discovery of roughly 30 unexploded World War II munitions has closed the borough's beaches. The big question for this Long Beach Island vacation spot -- and for all the North Jerseyans who visit during the summer -- is whether the beach will open by Memorial Day.

"If there is one main attraction in Surf City, it is our beach," said Mayor Leonard Connors, adding that the population swells from 1,400 to 14,000 by mid-summer and some oceanfront homes rent for as much as \$15,000 a week.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, in charge of a beach-restoration project that apparently brought the munitions ashore, says it is trying its best to finish by May 25 but is making no guarantees.

Khaalid Walls, a corps spokesman, said Tuesday that the government engineers have sectioned the beach into grids and are deploying metal detectors to look for additional ordnance buried as deep as 3 feet.

He said that after the beach is searched, which should be completed by mid-April, munitions removal experts will remove the ordnance, with a goal of finishing the job by May 25.

"If everything goes according to plan, that'll happen for us," Walls said. "So far, we're encouraged. We're actually moving ahead of schedule."

Walls said that after the removal is done, the corps will monitor the beach on a long-term basis.

Chris Duncan, a broker at Chambers & Lackey Realty in Surf City, says he's concerned about how thorough the corps will be.

"They can do a cursory job and get it done in a short period of time," he said. "But the reason they replenished the beach in the first place is because the sand washes away. If it washes away two or three feet down, you've got a new layer."

Since October, the corps has spent \$5.8 million to pump 500,000 cubic yards of sand from the floor of the Atlantic Ocean three miles offshore to replenish the borough's 1.4-mile-long beach and to plant new dune grass.

The problem began in early March, when a beachcomber with a metal detector found the first of many munitions. Soon after, an Army ordnance-disposal expert said the devices -- 9-inch-long fuses used to detonate bombs -- contained explosives and "had the potential to cause loss of limb, of eyesight and, under the right circumstances, loss of life."

The beach has been off-limits for a month.

Connors, the mayor, said the beach closings have already hurt Surf City.

"Some irate taxpayers have come in, understandably upset by this," he said. "People rent here in the spring

because they like the beach in the off-season, and it's closed."

The borough is a quiet community these days, with all the traffic lights on the Long Beach Boulevard blinking amber or red. But as summer approaches, day-trippers who walk on the beach, stop for a meal and look at bungalow rentals descend on the borough.

"With the beach closed, we'll lose that business, and the impact cannot be estimated," Connors said. "The sooner the beach situation is rectified, the better off we'll be."

According to a 2006 Scarborough Research report, nearly 500,000 residents of Bergen and Passaic counties visited the Jersey Shore or Atlantic City in the last year.

Chris Silva, a pharmacist at Surf City Pharmacy, said the whole situation is overblown.

"People are freaking out over nothing," she says. "They're working on it and they're going to take care of it. It's not like we're the first beach ever to have this happen."

Indeed, the Jersey Shore has a long history of military dumping -- witness last month's discovery of a Revolutionary War cannonball beneath 2 feet of sand in South Toms River, 25 miles to the north of Surf City.

In October 2005, after homeowners in Delaware and Maryland had installed new driveways made of clam shells dredged up 12 miles off New Jersey, 300 pieces of ordnance -- including a World War I 75mm artillery shell filled with mustard gas were discovered among the shells.

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