

Summer Plans and Environmental Issues Collide: A roundup of environmental happenings from ecoRI News

Bridge Repairs Push Bikers Into Roadways

Residents across Rhode Island's East Bay are reeling over the extended closure of two East Bay Bike Path bridges, which many say signifies a loss of recreational opportunities, a blow to local business and a shift in the social fabric of their communities.

More than 70 community members attended an online public presentation May 6 by the Rhode Island Department of Transportation (RIDOT) and the Barrington and Warren town councils to discuss temporary fixes to East Bay Bike Path bridge closures that have forced cyclists onto busy motor vehicle bridges for the past year and a half.

"What we have now is really playing with fire," said **Ron Pitt**, a Barrington resident. "Although we haven't had a serious accident yet, the potential is there."

After inspections revealed faulty foundations of the two bridges near the convergence of the Barrington and Palmer rivers, bike traffic was rerouted onto County Road bridge walkways already crowded with fishermen and pedestrians.

Robert Rocchio, RIDOT's chief engineer of infrastructure, recognized the need to improve the temporary reroutes. Updates, which he said will cost about \$2 million, will be in place for a minimum of two years as the state attempts to source the \$25 million needed to reconstruct the two 130-year-old bridges.

Members of both the Barrington and Warren town councils gave the temporary plan a hesitant go-ahead, seeing it as the only viable solution in the short term. But many pushed back when Rocchio suggested RIDOT could make these reroutes permanent to avoid an expensive bridge reconstruction project.

Westerly Flooded, and Not with Tourists

The Napatree Point access route and Larkin Square in Watch Hill are on the verge of inundation. The water level is mere inches below the adjacent concrete on a calm day. During high and king tides, waves easily breach the seawall near the Watch Hill Yacht Club, submerging parts of the parking lot and blocking the access point to a popular conservation area.

In 2019 alone, Napatree Point access was flooded and became impassable on 121 days.

This continued nuisance flooding has prompted officials in this coastal village to monitor rising waters and gather evidence and community support before embarking on ambitious stopgap measures to mitigate further damage and buy time.

Hoping to prevent catastrophe until they can devise a more permanent solution, the Watch Hill Fire District and the Watch Hill Conservancy were awarded a grant from the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management's Climate Resilience Fund to elevate and fortify the Napatree Point access route. The plan is to raise the elevation of the entrance using all-natural materials, including stone and sand, that will create a buffer against heavy wave action.

Multiple businesses already have elevated to protect themselves from nuisance flooding and sea-level rise, including the Watch Hill Yacht Club and the Lanphear Livery. The Livery was rehabilitated, restored and elevated 2 feet in 2016. The Watch Hill Yacht Club was also raised about 2 feet.

Georgia Jones has seen water engulf parking spots and creep up to the sidewalk in front of her family's century-old business, the Olympia Tea Room restaurant on Bay Street. Lost parking means lost business for the whole community, she said, so they'll have to do more than sandbag the front door to protect their livelihoods.

"Our plan for the future will be to lift the building up, but meeting the extensive criteria will be difficult. It's our only option," Jones said. "We are staring at the ocean, and the front door is approximately 7 feet above mean sea level, so we can't put this on the back burner."

Short-term fixes, such as reinforcing and rebuilding the seawall or moving businesses to the second floor, will buy time, but longer-term solutions are more challenging.

The Microscopic Organism that Could Ruin Your Stuffies

Stuffie season is upon us, and scientists at the University of Rhode Island's Graduate School of Oceanography are learning more about a microscopic organism that, despite its tiny size, can have a major impact, closing shellfisheries and making people sick.

Pseudo-nitzschia, an organism that produces the toxin domoic acid, the source of shellfish poisoning, was first documented in Prince Edward Island, Canada, in 1987. The same toxin has caused problems in Rhode Island, prompting extensive shellfish closures in Narragansett Bay in 2016 and 2017.

URI researchers know that Pseudo-nitzschia is not new to Narragansett Bay and that it hasn't always produced toxins. Water temperature didn't appear to influence toxin production, but there is a relationship between toxin production and nitrates. Toxin production appears to increase when nitrate levels are lower.