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# Fire Island's Storm Breach Spurs Debate

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By WILL JAMES

As the last mists of superstorm Sandy cleared, Thomas Schultz stood on a dock in Bellport on Long Island and watched a spot across the bay where white-crested ocean waves appeared to be crashing completely over Fire Island.

What he saw was a breach—a storm-carved opening through the barrier island off Long Island's South Shore—that effectively connected the Great South Bay and the Atlantic Ocean.

"It was romantic and scary at the same time," said Mr. Schultz, 47 years old, a local art gallery curator.

With every nor'easter since, the breach has grown, along with debate over whether to view the cut as natural or as damage in need of repair.



Enlarge Image

The Wall Street Journal

The water severed the barrier island at a place called Old Inlet, a onetime cut that allowed ships to sail to and from coastal villages such as Bellport and Brookhaven. Some historical accounts say it closed in the early 19th century, after a ship wrecked at its mouth.

The waterway's reincarnation—some call it "New Inlet"—has coincided with what residents described as serious flooding in communities along the Great South Bay. Residents say yards and basements have flooded on an almost-monthly basis since Sandy struck on Oct. 29. Politicians blame the breach, which is now 1,000 feet wide in spots, and have called for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to fill it in.

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"There are times where I can't get into the house without at least knee-high boots, because the water—just to get to the front door would be about calf deep," said Stephen Capitano, 51, a therapist who lives near the bay in Blue Point.

Amid calls for action, there is no hard data showing the breach is causing the flooding—a conclusion cited even by the governmental entities planning its closure. A marine scientist from Stony Brook University says data collected by sensors throughout the bay show the breach is having little to no impact on water levels or tides.

The professor, Charles Flagg, said he wasn't sure what was causing the flooding, but cited an unusual number of nor'easters struck this winter and tides were high along the East Coast.

"We seem to have had a particularly stormy couple of months relative to some years in the past. That may explain it," he said. "That's probably cold comfort for the people who are getting flooded, but I don't think the inlet is the author of their problems."

Steve Bellone, the Suffolk County executive, and other local politicians stood along the bay at a news conference on March 13 and called on federal and state governments to close the breach, even as they acknowledged doubts about the inlet's role in the flooding.

"We're not interested in having this as some sort of academic discussion at this point," Mr. Bellone said. "...This is not an academic debate to the people whose lives are being affected every day."

The next day, the New York state Department of Environmental Conservation announced it had asked the Army Corps to prepare to fill in the breach if it doesn't close up on its own over the summer, when sand tends naturally to build up—an outcome Mr. Flagg said was likely because the breach is relatively small and shallow.

The DEC said "there is no conclusive indication that the breach has affected tidal ranges or has impacted Long Island," but a Breach Contingency Plan developed in 1996 calls for all breaches in that area to be closed if they don't fill in naturally. A spokesman for the Army Corps said the agency recently started drafting plans to close the breach and doesn't yet have a cost estimate.

The plan has alarmed environmentalists, who said the breach should be allowed to live out its natural life span because it helps flush harmful substances out of the bay after decades of ecological decline. About 300 residents packed into the Bellport Middle School auditorium to discuss the breach on March 23. They overwhelmingly supported leaving it open.

Mr. Flagg said sensors have picked up high salinity levels in the bay since the breach opened. That is likely a sign that more ocean water is circulating in the bay, helping it become less stagnant and healthier for aquatic life.

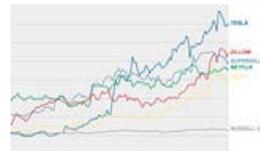
"I've seen the bay dying for 20 years, and this is nature's way of taking care of it, in my own opinion," said Fred Chiofalo, 69, a longtime bayman who lives in Brookhaven. "And I think it's something the bay really needs if it's going to sustain any type of fishing life."

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