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Beach work paying dividends

Sachuest, Third are better equipped to handle major storms

By Matt Sheley

Staff writer

MIDDLETOWN - Hurricane Sandy resiliency work is already paying dividends in Middletown.

Many of the people involved with the $3.4 million effort took a tour Thursday of several of the work sites, and they said they've heard positive feedback about each of the projects.

In addition to making Sachuest and Third beaches better equipped for major storms, they said water quality has improved, the beaches look nicer and it's drawn more attention to issues like stormwater runoff and climate change.

With the exception of some paving and culvert work to the Third Beach Road connector road that is expected to be done next year, all the projects have been completed.

“From our perspective, and I'm sure we'd all say this, the best part of this project was the partnerships that were formed, ” Aquidneck Land Trust Executive Director Chuck Allott said. “That's not to say we didn't work closely before, we did, but now we've accomplished something bigger and we're looking for new ways to do more.”

In the wake of the devastating storm in October 2012, more than $8 million in projects were completed across the Ocean State to make the area more storm-ready Among those include removal of a dam along the Pawcatuck River in Westerly, installing a backup generator and solar panels at the Rhode Island National Wildlife Complex in Charlestown and addressing problem areas in other shoreline communities.

As part of the local effort, the town of Middletown teamed up with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and about a dozen partners to bring in $3.4 million in federal assistance over the summer of 2014. The Fish & Wildlife Service oversees the Sachuest Point National Wildlife Refuge, which had damage to its 242 acres and parts of Sachuest Point Road

Meredith Brower photo Middletown Finance Director Marc Tanquay and Norman Bird Sanctuary Executive Director Natasha Harrison discuss the progress and success of resiliency projects on Thursday near Third Beach in Middletown.

during the storm.

In addition to the marsh restoration work, part of Third Beach Road was raised to help prevent it from flooding, utility lines along Sachuest Point Road were buried and other stormwater work was done to help improve water quality in the Maidford River.

The most controversial part of the project was a plan to install walkover structures at Sachuest Beach. The idea was to fill in gaps in the dunes where there are paths to the beach, creating one long, uninterrupted dune system to help contain the ocean surge in bad weather.

As details of that plan were announced, a number of local leaders and residents said the tall walkover structures would be an eyesore and make it impossible for some to access the beach. As a result, that plan was dropped and replaced with one where the dunes were altered on the beach side to prevent water from rushing up the pathways and into the parking lot.

Thursday's tour started at the Surfer's

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End parking lot, where new sand filters were installed to clean rainwater runoff before it flows onto the beach and into Sachuest Bay.

In addition to Allott, whose Aquidneck Avenue land protection group partnered with the town on the Sandy resiliency project, there were several others involved with the effort, including Aquidneck Island Planning Commission Executive Director Thomas Ardito, Middletown Town Engineer Warren Hall, Norman Bird Sanctuary Executive Director Natasha Harrison, Kate Jamison of GreenSmith Public Affairs and Middletown Finance Director Marc Tanguay.

Other project partners were the Center for Ecosystem Restoration, the Easton's Point Neighborhood Association, The Nature Conservancy, the Preservation Society of Newport County, Prince Charitable Trusts, the Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council, the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, Save The Bay, the Scenic Aquidneck Coalition and the van Beuren Charitable Foundation.

“If you look at what's been done, it's high yield, low impact work,” Ardito said. “Most people probably don't even realize the impact of this work, but there's no doubt it's making a difference.”

Hall pointed out two new bioretention ponds built by the parking lot of Paradise Valley Park on Prospect Avenue where Boyd's Wind Grist Mill is located.

The way the ponds work, Hall explained, is rainwater from the park's parking lot and Prospect Avenue gets channeled through them to filter the runoff before it enters the Maidford River. The river follows a path to Third Beach, emptying south of the town's boat ramp.

The two ponds are part of a network of five bioretention areas along the Maidford, as far away as Berkeley Avenue, to help clean runoff before it makes its way to the beach or into nearby reservoirs. Hall said the five bioretention areas filter 7 percent of all the stormwater runoff in the Maidford River watershed.

“If you look at what's happening here, it's definitely making a difference,” Hall said. “We're not at the beach, but it impacts what's happening there.”

Harrison, property manager Joe McLaughlin and land technician Cameron McCormick took guests through some of the work that's happening at the Norman Bird Sanctuary.

They said without constant monitoring, things slip quickly at the 325-acre operation, which has direct access to part of Third Beach.

Everyone involved said they are continuing to seek grant money to keep the momentum going. Harrison said the educational component is critical to the effort because people are the source of the problem.

“We've incorporated this work into our lessons and a lot of kids who come to see us know nothing about it when they arrive, but know all about it by the time they leave,” Harrison said. “The more consciousness we can create, the better stewards of the environment they're going to be as they get older.”

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Thomas Ardito, executive director of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, discusses Thursday a bioretention pond built by the parking lot of Paradise Valley Park on Prospect Avenue in Middletown.

Meredith Brower photo

Norman Bird Sanctuary Executive Director Natasha Harrison explains the watershed plan and shows slides of the terrain.

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