

Corps May Dig Bluffs

BY JANIS HEWITT

A proposal by the Army Corps of Engineers to remove shell fragments from an 8.5 acre-blufftop site in the southwest section of Camp Hero in Montauk has outraged some in the community.

At a poorly attended meeting last Thursday evening at the Montauk Downs, some Montauk residents argued that digging into the bluffs would hasten erosion. "Their integrity would never be the same," said Richard Kahn, a member of the Montauk Citizens Advisory Committee and the Concerned Citizens of Montauk.

For their part, Army Corps representatives argued that embedded artillery fragments could pose a danger if they were not removed. Roland Belew, an ordnance removal expert from the Army Corps, told the group that similar places believed to be safe proved otherwise for several young children who found shell fragments and played with them.

In examples elsewhere, two young boys lost their lives when the shells exploded and another who attempted to open a walnut with what he believed was a rock lost a limb, Mr. Belew said.

Mr. Belew said Montauk has been lucky because the rocks on the beach at Camp Hero sometimes prevent the fragments from washing back on to the shore. "The rocks slow the migration," he said.

Last Thursday's meeting had been called to report the findings of a search, which the corps started last spring, for explosives or other hazardous material left behind on the former military base.

Although the engineering team reported that no live ordnance had been found, shell fragments fired from the land into the sea could still wash up and into the hands of unsuspecting beachcombers or metal detector enthusiasts, it said.

In addition, as the bluffs erode and crumble into the sea so do the fragments buried in them, explained Don Silkebakken, the project manager, who added that the "ribbon of coastline" slated for remediation was used for demolition operations during World War II and is where large items, including pieces of rockets, 105-millimeter projectiles, and highly corroded scrap, had been discovered.

The items were found only 12 to 18 inches beneath the surface level, and the engineers did not feel a superficial dig of the cliffs would hurt

them much, noting that the contractor would disturb the area as little as possible. The team reiterated several times that public safety was its main concern.

However, the report, which is on file at the Montauk Library, said it might be necessary to dig as deep as four feet. When pressed to comment, the engineers repeatedly stated that four feet would be the maximum depth allowed, and that the corps would dig that far only if additional tests suggested it was necessary.

Several in the audience, including Mr. Kahn and Lisa Greci, also a member of the Montauk Citizens Advisory Committee and the Concerned Citizens of Montauk, maintained, however, that the site should be left untouched.

"The alternative here is to do nothing and this cries out for that solution," Mr. Kahn said, adding that he walks the cliffs and beach there on a regular basis and has never seen any scrap ordnance.

He wondered why an environmental impact statement had not been undertaken and said he feared for the endangered and threatened wildlife there if too much of the park is disturbed. If holes were dug into the

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Bluffs

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bluffs they would never be the same, he said, adding that rain and ground-water would fill in the holes and eventually take down the entire bluff.

"You must have some evaluation of the impact this would have, and I've seen zilch!" he said.

Mrs. Greci joined in, adding, "It's ludicrous for you to consider this. They will fall down." She said that most in the community did not want to see any more work done on the site.

Luz O. Spann-LaBato, the corps project engineer, said she was surprised at their reaction. "We usually get people asking us, 'Why aren't you cleaning up that area?'"

Jay Schneiderman, East Hampton Town supervisor, noted that Camp Hero is a heavily "raided" site because of "The Montauk Project," a book about time travel and abductions at Camp Hero. The supervisor said if the ordnance were removed in an environmentally sensitive manner he would support the project.

"If one kid were to die there we all would say we wish we had done it," Mr. Schneiderman told the audience.

"I'm shocked that our supervisor would support this without an environmental study," Mrs. Greci said.

"And I'm shocked that anyone would not listen to the Army Corps when the safety of our children is involved," Mr. Schneiderman said.

Mrs. Greci said nothing had happened on the site for the last "100" years.

"It only takes one time," Mr. Schneiderman said.

State park officials were at the meeting but mostly remained silent. Afterward, George Gorman, director of public affairs and recreation services for state parks, said the state had not yet decided on whether to support the Army Corps' recommendation.

"I don't believe the state has analyzed it or determined whether we will support it," he said.

The base was transferred from the federal government to the State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation in the early '80s with a covenant that it be used for "passive" recreation only.

Several times the state has proposed adding revenue-producing activity to the property, such as a golf course or lodging, to the alarm of many Montauk residents, some of whom were further alarmed when they read in the Army Corps summary report that the park was expected to be used both actively and passively in the future.

Before deciding what to do with the park, Mr. Gorman said, the state was waiting to see the recommendations in a master plan now being prepared by Tom Lyons, director of environmental management of state parks. In the meantime, he said, the state would like to open the park for biking, hiking, fishing, and other nature-related activities as soon as possible.

"Our main priority is to make it safe," he said.

A 30-day public comment period began on Friday. More information can be obtained by visiting www.projecthost.com, and comments can be sent to the attention of Ms. Spann-LaBato at the Army Corps of Engineers, 190 State Highway 18, Suite 202, East Brunswick, N.J. 08816-1407.