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For Montauk, It's Lighthouse vs. Surf's Up!

By [COREY KILGANNON](#)

MONTAUK, N.Y., Nov. 10 — The Montauk Point Lighthouse was commissioned by President George Washington and completed in 1796 and may be the most recognized landmark on Long Island. If left unprotected, it could also be a few good storms away from falling down its steadily eroding bluff into the ocean.

So the [Army Corps of Engineers](#) is embarking on a \$14 million plan to save the lighthouse by building a sea wall of boulders to protect the bluff. But a group of surfers say the boulders that would save the lighthouse would ruin Alamo, the world-renowned surf break just beyond its shadow, and they have a counterproposal.

Dude, just move the lighthouse back.

“I know the lighthouse people feel the current location is hallowed ground, the spot George Washington built the lighthouse on, but we as surfers feel the same way about Alamo,” said Tom Naro, the chairman of the eastern Long Island chapter of the Surfrider Foundation. “All of our research and science has grown out of protecting the wave, and it all indicates that moving the lighthouse is a much better and cheaper option in the long run.”

The Corps of Engineers has assured the surfers that its sea wall would not ruin the waves. It considered moving the lighthouse but decided it would cost too much to transport the delicate structure over severely sloping terrain.

Though the officials in charge say it is too late to change gears, the surfers — whose organization and efficiency around this issue run contrary to their mellow stereotype — have in recent weeks met with politicians, distributed fliers and commissioned studies to block the Corps of Engineers' plan to drop a wall of 12-ton boulders on their surf break. The corps says the surfers' proposal to move the lighthouse back 800 feet instead would cost \$27 million.

In a 35-page position paper, the surfers argue that the sea wall — 840 feet long, 40 feet thick and known as a revetment — would imperil not just the Alamo but also another favorite break just down the beach, at Turtle Cove.

At a restaurant here in Montauk on Friday night, Thomas Muse, the environmental director of the Surfrider chapter, gave a slide-show presentation to a roomful of 50 tanned, long-haired surfers, many of them taking notes as he indicated with a red laser pointer how the revetment would interfere with the

waves.

"We're building a groundswell and we'll get some attention," Mr. Muse promised. He pointed out that other historic lighthouses — including Southeast on Block Island, Cape Hatteras in North Carolina and Highland on Cape Cod — have been moved successfully. "It's not like we're barking up some radical tree here — there are precedents all over," he said.

But Greg Donohue, erosion control manager for the Montauk Historical Society, which owns and maintains the lighthouse, said that it was simply too fragile — "it would have to be taken apart brick by brick" — and that the location atop Turtle Hill was integral to its history. He criticized the surfers for raising their concerns after the Corps of Engineers' \$1 million study was completed and for threatening the largest anti-erosion project in the lighthouse's 210-year life.

"Suddenly, they come along and think they know better, and they're trying to stop this," he complained. "They have no scientific dialogue, they just say, 'We're for saving the beach.' To me the lighthouse is more important than Alamo, but to them Alamo is more important than the lighthouse."

Montauk Light, on the eastern tip of Long Island, was the first lighthouse built in New York State and is the fourth-oldest active lighthouse in the country, according to Mr. Donohue. When it was completed on Nov. 5, 1796, on the Turtle Hill plateau, the edge of the bluff was about 300 feet away. Erosion has been eating away at a rate of more than a foot a year, and now, at its closest point, the bluff is about 75 feet from the lighthouse.

In 1946, the Corps of Engineers installed a 700-foot stone revetment, which was overrun by storms a few years later. The bluff seemed to be hopelessly deteriorating until Giorgina Reid of Manhattan began a one-woman crusade to shore it up with her own methods of terracing and planting. Local residents have conducted vigils and concerts starring the likes of Paul Simon to raise money to help prevent erosion. In the mid-'90s, Mr. Donohue helped build a ring of boulders as a sea wall, but erosion continues.

Montauk, meanwhile, has become increasingly popular as a surfing spot; the champion longboarder Joel Tudor surfed here regularly last summer, and local surfers see more and more visiting top pros. Though surfing is officially prohibited at the point, the ban is enforced only sporadically.

There are three main breaks: Alamo is best in big surf, but some surfers favor the clean waves of Turtle Cove, and when winds howl out of the southeast, the area northwest of the point is one of the few good surf spots on Long Island.

The Surfrider Foundation, with 50,000 members nationally, has grown into a lobbying force. Earlier this year, it helped defeat a large dredging project in Long Beach, in Nassau County.

The group's leaders say it is easier to organize opposition against a project that involves typical preservationists' issues, like historic buildings or open space. It is more difficult, they said, to persuade public officials to save a wave.

The surfers argue that in the long run, moving the lighthouse would be the most cost-efficient option, even if it costs \$27 million as the corps estimates. "It's a better deal for the taxpayer to move the lighthouse," Mr. Muse said. "You're done for 300 years."

Joe Jakubik, a project manager for International Chimney, a Buffalo company that has moved several historic lighthouses elsewhere and has repaired this one in the past, said moving it would be complicated by the softened mortar between its stones.

He estimated that the lighthouse weighs 3,000 tons, and said it could be lifted off its 13-foot-deep foundation by dozens of hydraulic jacks so a platform could be slipped underneath. The hydraulics would keep the tower level while rolling along uneven ground, he said, and the chief danger would be uneven pressure creating stress cracks.

"That lighthouse is extremely fragile, but there are methods that would put limited stress on it," Mr. Jakubik said. "There'd be some problems moving it, a greater degree of difficulty, but nothing that couldn't be overcome. It's just a matter of expense and work."

Mr. Donohue, who lives in Montauk year-round, has been working on the erosion problem here for 25 years. He criticized the surfers' group for stirring up controversy that could endanger a project that is based on decades of careful study, including wave-tank analysis at the [University of Delaware](#) that showed Alamo would not be seriously affected by the revetment.

"A wave is something very difficult to pin down, the dynamics of it," he said. "If they had hard scientific information on how our work is going to destroy their wave, we would look at it. Instead, they're just beating a drum and playing the politics of beach erosion. They are spreading propaganda and innuendo and false information to politicians."

"We're not destroying a wave," Mr. Donohue added. "We're preserving a lighthouse."

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