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Steven A. Rosenberg | June 24, 2016

A Rocky Road to a Sandy Beach

No one ever compared Winthrop Beach to the French Riviera. But after 19 years of planning and nearly \$30 million in public funding, plenty of residents along this congested strip of coast had high expectations.

Some hoped for a flat, sandy beach. Others wanted the millions of rocks and stones to be removed so they could take a peaceful walk. Beach residents, who watched in terror when high tides tossed waves and stones during nor'easters and flooded streets and homes during every bad storm, just wanted the state to do something about the sea walls.

Well, one out of three isn't bad.

Since the state finally began work on the project more than three years ago, there hasn't been a major flood during a storm. That's because the Department of Conservation and Recreation essentially built a new beach, trucking 500,000 cubic yards of sand from Rumney Marsh in Saugus to Winthrop.

Workers dumped the sand over the beach, which had been decimated by the Blizzard of '78. After that storm, during which seaside residents had to be evacuated, the beach dipped down as far as 20 feet below the sea wall, leaving curtains of stones, rocks, and small boulders of all sizes for decades. To make things worse, the "No Name" storm of 1991 contributed to the beach's bleakness. The strip continued to erode, since there was no nearby sand or earth from natural bluffs to renourish the already decimated coast.

There were hiccups even before the sand arrived from Saugus. The first part of the project, in 2013, used sand from behind the beach's breakwater to cover the southern end of the 37-acre stretch. The DCR also rebuilt a jetty in front of that tip. Within a few months, much of the sand had drifted out to sea and to the south toward Boston. Then in the last few years, residents said stones from the rebuilt jetty — which once had trapped the sand and kept it on the beach — started falling into the water.

"I could watch the sand drifting out to sea from my house," said Cheryl Tobey, who has lived there all of her life, and was one of the main advocates for a new beach.

She pointed to large boulders that had fallen off the jetty and were sitting in the sea. "They need to fix the jetty," said Tobey, who is thankful the flooding has subsided for now but fears things could change during any bad storm.

House Speaker Robert A. DeLeo, a native son of Winthrop, said he was satisfied with the shore protection work but did not specifically address the erosion when asked. In an e-mail, DeLeo said: "Recent storms have shown the flood control plan is working. I continue to meet with DCR and have questions for the agency on improving recreational use of Winthrop Beach."

Norman Orrall, chief of planning and engineering at the DCR, said there were no plans to add more sand or to repair the jetty. "As far as a long-term maintenance plan, that's forthcoming," he said. "But I think we made it clear that the movement is hard to control at the beach."

While the beach earned one of the highest grades in Greater Boston for its water quality from Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, much of it is inaccessible. Acres of sandy beach have been fenced off to allow birds listed as threatened or endangered to nest. These days, there's about 16 piping plovers and another 150 least terns on the beach, and they'll remain there until their chicks hatch in late summer, said Jorge Ayub, a DCR coastal ecologist.

Farther down the beach, I finally found a few acres of flat, sandy terrain that I could walk on and spoke with Chuck Mullane. Like other residents, Mullane, a retired school teacher, seemed disappointed in the overall cosmetics of the beach but expressed gratitude that the floodwaters had subsided.

"We didn't think it would be Miami Beach or Provincetown, but we thought it would be better than this," he said.

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Cheryl Tobey on the rocky shore at Winthrop Beach.
STEVEN ROSENBERG/GLOBE STAFF

