

BREACH CREATES AN OPINION DIVIDE

BY [ANDREW WELSCH](#) | MARCH 20TH, 2013 | [PRINT](#)



COURTESY OF DR. CHARLES FLAGG AND RICH GIANNOTTI.

ABOVE WATER: Scientists say Sandy had nothing to do with recent flooding along Long Island's South Shore. Politicians and homeowners don't agree, and want an inlet that opened after the super storm filled.

Recent flooding along Long Island's South Shore has nothing to do with a breach created by Hurricane Sandy, scientists say – but some homeowners and politicians aren't buying it.

Homeowners have voiced concerns about the link between the breach, also called an inlet, and water levels in the bay after a powerful storm battered the region and caused widespread flooding earlier this month. Suffolk County Executive Steven Bellone and other Long Island elected officials also attribute the flooding to the breach – located at a place called Old Inlet within the Fire Island National Seashore – and want it closed immediately.

"We're seeing flooding in places where we've never seen flooding before," Bellone said at a March 13 news conference.

Bellone, a Democrat, said that he and other officials, including Sen. Chuck Schumer, called for government agencies to close the breach in November. But the National Park Service and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation chose to leave the breach open so that scientists could monitor it, Bellone said.

Flood of Viewpoints

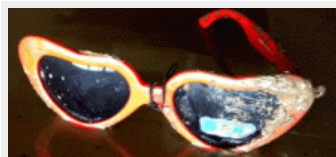
After a major storm hit the area in the last week of February, the breach doubled in width on its ocean side to 1,171 feet from 613 feet. It remains virtually unchanged on its bay side.

"The time for academic debate is over. The time for action is now," Bellone said.

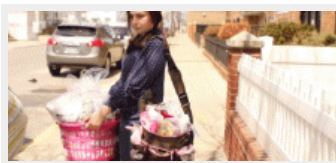
The state responded by asking the Army Corps of Engineers to begin preparations to fill in the breach. The Corps was unable to provide an estimate for the cost of plugging it. A significantly smaller breach in Cuspsogue County Park was filled almost immediately after Hurricane Sandy at a cost of \$6.1 million and required about 200,000 cubic yards of sand, according to Corps spokesman Chris Gardner.

But scientists believe the breach has not caused the flooding. Cheryl Hapke, a

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coastal geologist with the U.S. Geological Survey, blamed the breach on increased frequency of powerful winter storms. Hapke said nothing in the data suggested that the breach was contributing to the flooding.

"With any storm – breach or not – you would expect water levels to rise," she said.

Shift in the Tide

Her assessment is confirmed by the most recent data gathered by Charles Flagg, a coastal geologist at Stony Brook University who has been monitoring the breach weekly.

In a report released on March 15, Flagg said that a comparison of tidal records from Bellport, directly across from the breach, and Lindenhurst, about 35 miles to the west, shows no significant difference between the two. If the breach was influencing water levels, then the tide should be higher at Bellport than at Lindenhurst because of Bellport's proximity of to the inlet, he said.

Tidal records at Woods Hole, in southern Massachusetts, show the same increase in water levels during the storms, suggesting that flooding has been a regional, not a local problem.

"So despite fears to the contrary, the breach at Old Inlet is not responsible for the increased frequency of flooding of the western or eastern Great South Bay," Flagg said.

Still, Bellone and other officials want the breach closed.

"They can't say that it is definitively not contributing to the flooding," said Vanessa Baird-Streeter, Bellone's spokesperson. "The debate is over. It's time to address the breach."

County Legislator Rob Calarco, whose district includes several shoreline communities like Blue Point and Patchogue that have suffered from extensive flooding, dismissed the scientists' analysis.

"My concern is what happens when we have another Hurricane Sandy," said Calarco, a Democrat, who noted that barrier islands are a necessary protection against storms. "If that carries through to August, we're in hurricane season again."

There are environmental benefits to leaving the breach open, according to scientists and environmentalists. Increasing water circulation in the bay flushes out pollutants. Some local residents have noticed the improvement in water quality.

Seeking Clarity

"I'm on the water daily, my boats are on the water, and it's cleaner than I've ever seen it," said Mark DeAngelis, owner of the West Sayville Marina.

Rob Young, a coastal geologist, said that breaches and inlets also are part of the natural process of beach replenishment. When a breach is left open, the ocean adds sand to the back area of the barrier island, helping to add width and volume over time. This process strengthens the island and allows for the growth of salt marshes that can provide flood protection.

"When you fill in a breach, you lose the sand in the back area. You're missing all the ecological development," said Young, the director of the program for developed shorelines at Western Carolina University. "If you're a politician, you may think that the safe bet is to close it in the short-term, but you're sacrificing long-term gains for short-term benefits."

Some of Long Island's elected officials are not yet in favor of closing the breach. Suffolk County Legislator Kate Browning doesn't believe there's enough accurate information to link the flooding to the breach, said Joshua Slaughter, her legislative aide.

"She is extremely concerned, but she reserves judgment to the experts," he said.



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