

# Outer Banks Rebuilding After Irene

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It's not much more than an enormous sandbar 20 miles out in the Atlantic Ocean. One that has been shaped and molded by storms and ocean waves – moving ever so slowly westward toward the mainland.

It is a process that has gone on uninterrupted for millennia. That is, until modern-day vacationers discovered the remarkable place known as the Outer Banks of North Carolina. They built homes and roads. Bridges and shopping centers. Go-Kart tracks and golf courses. And they have tried time and time again to wrestle the shifting sands of the banks into submission.

But humans can only do so much.

When a hurricane like Irene comes calling, the sands move in dramatic fashion. That happened a month ago. The storm cut two breaches through Hatteras Island. One, in the Pea Island Wildlife Refuge, is more than 250 feet wide. The U.S. Geological Survey is studying it to see if it might be an ancient inlet that has reopened and should stay open. The other is about 4 miles south in Mirlo Beach and left at least three summer homes teetering on the verge of collapse.

In both of those places, the storm wiped out Highway 12, Hatteras Island's only road link to the mainland. The island was virtually cut off. The state quickly established an emergency ferry system from Stumpy Point to Rodanthe to bring over supplies and construction equipment. But any vacationers have to take a long ferry ride from either Cedar Island or Swan Quarter to Ocracoke – traverse the island, take another ferry to Hatteras Village, then do it all again to go back home. And the ferries can only carry about 500 cars each day. That's fewer than the number Highway 12 can handle in an hour.

The result has been a decimation of the fall tourist season in Hatteras. Business at places like the Kavanaugh family's Rod and Gun store is down at least 70 percent. The highway -- their lifeline -- needs to be fixed, says Natalie Kavanaugh. "It's critical for us to be able to survive the winter," she said. "To be able to buy things for the next season, it's critical for people to get their houses recovered, to get appliances here. That road needs to be put together quick."

I heard the same thing from Beth Midgett, whose family owns the largest real estate company on the island. They manage about 500 vacation homes, the majority of which are sitting vacant. "It is absolutely everything to us," she says. "We can't survive without it. Period. We can't survive without it. We wouldn't be here, many of the businesses would be gone."

In Mirlo beach, NCDOT quickly filled the breach back in and will start paving the new road today. But on Pea Island, the task is much more daunting. Pablo Hernandez is the engineer in charge of putting Humpty Dumpty back together again. He's been doing this type of work since Hurricane Isabel tore a 1500 foot channel between Frisco and Hatteras Village back in 2003. It took two months to complete the job. During that time, students had to take a ferry to school. As complex as that was, he says the Pea Island breach is much worse. A company is building a temporary bridge over the gap that should be ready by the middle of October. That will put the road back in service. What to do about the breach is another question. Hernandez has no clue at the moment.

This repair job – including the temporary bridge will cost \$10 million in Federal taxpayer dollars. That's on top of the \$34.8 million that has been spent over the last decade to fix the highway, and make repairs to the Bonner bridge, which links Hatteras Island to the Nag's Head area. On top of that, work will soon begin on a replacement for the 50 year-old Bonner Bridge. The cost of that project? \$216 million.

If you're thinking "that's a lot of money to spend on a road that gets washed out with almost every significant hurricane, tropical storm or nor'easter", you're not alone.

"North Carolina 12 is one of the most vulnerable spots in the state." That's Robert Young talking. He's a geologist at Western Carolina University, and a prominent critic of rebuilding on barrier islands.

"We've been trying to hold that barrier island in place for the last two or three decades and it's trying to move landward in response to these storms," he says. "The fact we've been trying to keep that road there for so long means that it's more vulnerable than ever."

Young is convinced that nature will ultimately win the tug-of-war over the island and that one day, owing to the inexorable migration of sand, the sparkling new bridge will become a real "bridge to nowhere", simply because the island it services won't be there anymore. In his estimation, it's an enormous waste of money.

To Bobby Outten, it's a sound investment. Outten is the Manager of Dare County.

"I would say absolutely it's an investment. You have to invest the money to get that kind of return on the money and it seems to me that it's a good investment because you are getting a good return."

The 'returns' he's talking about are the tourist dollars. The Outer Banks is a national vacation hotspot. Dare county takes in \$1.1 billion dollars in an average season. Hatteras Island accounts for about \$300 million of that. Dare is a donor county, funneling far more money to the state than it receives.

Outten doesn't mind paying for other county's projects, including roads.

"We don't have a problem with that," he told Fox News. "But we also expect our roads to be built and maintained just like they are in other places throughout the country."

Some critics of rebuilding have suggested Hatteras Island return to a ferry system – like they had before the Bonner Bridge was built. Nearby Ocracoke is served only by ferry, and it seems to work fine there, they say. But Hatteras residents and business owners say you only need to look at the current state of things to see how well a ferry system would work.

Says Beth Midgett, “The ferry service I think we have proven here in the last three to four weeks definitely could not support the amount of business that we need to sustain ourselves out here. Hopefully we put that argument to rest.”

One other radical idea has been floated – in fact it’s talked about nearly every time a barrier island anywhere in the US is decimated by a storm. Depopulate Hatteras Island, stop the repair and rebuilding and simply turn it back over to nature. FEMA actually did that in Gilchrist, Texas after Hurricane Ike. FEMA bought out most of the homeowners in exchange for the promise they would never again build there.

I asked Natalie Kavanaugh about that. She can trace her roots on the Outer Banks back to the days of the colonists and pirates like Edward Teach – the infamous “Blackbeard”. Not surprisingly, she doesn’t like the idea one bit.

“It would be a cultural shock to the system to see something like that happen,” she told me. “I don’t think they could buy us out with enough money for what we would lose. And how do you relocate an entire community?”

Ultimately, that’s what it will come down to. Money. Outer Banks tourism brings in a ton of it.

There are billions of dollars worth of oceanfront real estate here that would have to be bought out. Add to that a history that dates back to the 1500s and locals believe there is a powerful case to keep putting the sand – and the road – back whenever nature gets angry.

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