Covering sandbags again may cost $1M, town says

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The nor’easter that blew into Long Island last Friday battered an artificial dune in Montauk, exposing a half-mile-long stretch of buried sandbags intended to combat erosion along the beach.

Repairing the damage could cost East Hampton Town $1 million, officials said. That follows an earlier $300,000 estimate to re-cover the sandbags that had already been exposed this winter. The town is responsible for the project maintenance and must have the beach replenished by May 15, according to its agreement with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Wednesday’s nor’easter did not hit the South Fork as hard as the rest of Long Island and did little to worsen the damage, officials said. But forecasters are watching the development and possible path of another coastal storm for early next week.

Town officials have budgeted for the sandbag-covering expense and can withdraw funds from the capital reserve fund, town Supervisor Peter Van Scoyoc said. The town will probably wait as late as possible to commission the work, as the beach is in a narrow winter profile and some sand could be deposited naturally by the summer.

“We’ll be moving forward to make sure everything is in place and that that beach gets restored to its normal conditions prior to the beginning of the [summer tourist] season,” Van Scoyoc said.

But, he said, the damage would have been much worse were it not for the 14,000 sandbags installed by the Army Corps in 2016.

“I think it’s safe to say we’d be looking at exposed hotel foundations, exposed cesspools, and swimming pools tilting over the edge if the project hadn’t been put there,” Van Scoyoc said at a town board work session on Tuesday.

The latest development comes about a month after consultants presented a study to the town that calls for a move inland of some of Montauk’s waterfront businesses over concerns about rising sea levels and erosion. The report did not identify specific businesses that would need to move farther inland, but a map of areas prone to flooding includes properties along South Emerson Avenue, a stretch that features several oceanfront motels.

Critics have derided use of the 1.7-ton geotextile sandbags, which have given the area the nickname “dirtbag beach” among locals, as the town works to fight worsening erosion.

Kevin McAllister, founder of Sag Harbor-based Defend H2O, an environmental conservation organization, noted the structures reflect rather than absorb wave energy, making the water more turbulent and the shoreline less resilient.

He supports removing the bags, rebuilding the primary dune and relocating the front-row businesses inland.

“A structural approach is unsustainable over the long term,” he said of the sandbags. “It’s cost prohibitive. How long can you keep pace with rising sea level?”

Town officials have said the sandbag project is an interim measure until the Army Corps performs a broader reconstruction of the beach as part of its $1 billion Fire Island to Montauk Reformulation Study. Army Corps representatives did not respond to an email seeking an update on the project’s timeline.

Until the full reconstruction, the town probably will have to continue to periodically cover the sandbags. Van Scoyoc raised the issue of creating a special taxing district to finance the beach maintenance.

“It’s going to be an ongoing issue that we as a coastal community will have to deal with,” he said of erosion.