

POST-TRIBUNE

Environmentists oppose extension of Ogden Dunes revetment along Lake Michigan shoreline

By Tim Zorn
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Beachgoers walk past boulders, an exposed retaining wall, and a damaged walking path on Ogden Dunes Beach at Ogden Dunes in Portage Township, Ind., on Friday, May 14, 2021. Erosion in recent years required the placement of boulders along the beach in 2020 to protect homes, but more beachfront has appeared in 2021. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune) (John J. Kim/ Chicago Tribune)

A little more than three years ago, Lake Michigan was at its highest level in more than 30 years, and waves dashed up against the sheet steel piling that lakefront homeowners in the town of Ogden Dunes had installed in the 1980s and 1990s.

Worried that the piling was vulnerable and their homes were in danger, the town petitioned for permission to install a revetment — a layer of large, interlocking boulders along the shoreline — to protect their homes.

State and federal officials relented eventually, allowing the revetment along the more vulnerable eastern half of the Ogden Dunes shoreline.

The homeowners paid for the work.

Now the town is asking the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Indiana Department of Natural Resources again for permission to extend the revetment along the western half of the shoreline, some 2,970 feet.

The DNR issued a permit for the work on June 1. The Corps of Engineers hasn't decided yet.



Three-year old Gabriel Lambooy chases after a plastic bag as his mother, Briana Lambooy, and four-year-old brother Theo play in the water on Ogden Dunes Beach at Ogden Dunes in Portage Township, Ind., on Friday, May 14, 2021. Erosion in recent years required the placement of boulders along the beach in 2020 to protect homes, but more beachfront appeared in 2021. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune) (John J. Kim/ Chicago Tribune)

Save the Dunes, a Michigan City-based environmental organization, announced this week that it is appealing the DNR's decision.

The environmental group did not file an objection to Ogden Dunes' first project, Save the Dunes Executive Director Betsy Maher acknowledged.

"We weren't happy with it, but at the time the waters were quite high," she said.

But Lake Michigan is more than two feet lower than it was three years ago, and the emergency doesn't seem as dire.

"Now we think there's an opportunity to pause and consider alternatives," Maher said.

Scott Kingan, the Ogden Dunes Town Council president, filed the town's latest permit application with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. He did not reply to an email request for comment before this article was submitted.

The public-comment period for the Corps of Engineers permit application ended Monday.

Conservation Law Center, a public-interest law firm, filed Save the Dunes' administrative appeal Monday with the Indiana Natural Resources Commission, a 12-member board that "addresses issues pertaining to the Department of Natural Resources."

The appeal contends, among other issues, that DNR allowed an Ordinary High Water Mark — the boundary between the publicly-owned lakeshore and the privately-owned inland — that was lower than the one previously adopted by the state, which meant more stone could be placed there.



A jogger heads west along Ogden Dunes Beach at Ogden Dunes in Portage Township, Ind., on Friday, May 14, 2021. Erosion in recent years required the placement of boulders along the beach in 2020 to protect homes, but more beachfront appeared in 2021. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune) (John J. Kim/ Chicago Tribune)

Save the Dunes said in its news release that a revetment “hardens” the shoreline and can prevent the public from enjoying the lake shore.

“And shoreline hardening often leads to more shoreline hardening,” Save the Dunes said, “because sea walls, jetties, and revetments impede the natural accumulation of sand, perpetuating erosion farther and farther down the beach. ...

“Indiana’s few remaining stretches of natural Lake Michigan shoreline host incredible biodiversity and beauty. Save the Dunes advocates for the protection of these precious resources so that both current and future generations can continue to enjoy them.”

Save the Dunes said both the National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have opposed the revetment because of its potential effect on Indiana Dunes National Park, which surrounds Ogden Dunes.

A better protection alternative to extending the revetment, Maher said, would be a continuing beach nourishment project that pumps sand onto the shore, particularly on the western end of Ogden Dunes’ lakefront.

Environmental organizations as well as the town contend that sea walls built into Lake Michigan, such as those that protect the Port of Indiana, have disrupted the natural westerly flow of sand along the Lake Michigan shoreline, cutting off the sand flow to the beaches — including the national park’s Portage Lakefront and Riverwalk — west of the port.

The goal, Maher said, has been to have an ongoing beach nourishment project paid for the entity that created the problem.

“We think that is the long-term solution,” she said.

Tim Zorn is a freelance reporter for the Post-Tribune.