

Breakwater needs to be rebuilt, Army Corps says

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
Wednesday, 07 August 2013 17:44

Condition so bad 'it seems as if next big storm could wash structure away,' agency reports

Almost the entire eastern half of Port Washington's north breakwater is structurally unsound and dangerous and should be rebuilt as soon as possible, according to a harbor inspection report by the Army Corps of Engineers.

"In some sections, it seems as if the next big storm may wash the structure away," the report reads. "Therefore, it is recommended that a major rehabilitation be performed along the entire reach as soon as funds become available."

According to the report, which was distributed to aldermen Tuesday, a large portion of the breakwater has failed, another segment in very poor condition and a smaller area is in poor condition.

Only a small segment of the breakwater near shore is listed in good condition, needing only minor maintenance work, according to the report.

For city officials who have been working hard to convince the Army Corps, which owns the breakwater, that the crumbling structure is in desperate need of repair, the report is validation and represents hope that something will finally get done.

"I think this is about everything we hoped it could be," Mayor Tom Mlada told the Common Council. "It's a pretty impactful report. I think it underscores the sense of urgency we feel."

The seriousness of the breakwater's condition is reflected in the fact this report is a 181-page document, as compared to the 10-page report issued by the Corps four years ago, Mlada said.

"There's a lot to digest here," he said, noting representatives from the Corps are expected to be at the Common Council's Tuesday, Aug. 20, meeting to discuss the report.

Mlada said he also plans to discuss the report with U.S. Rep. Tom Petri, a longtime member of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure who in June toured the breakwater with city officials and expressed concern about its condition.

Petri can not only help shepherd the issue through Congress but also guide the city through the process, Mlada said.

The breakwater is important because it not only protects the harbor and marina from powerful lake waves, it is also a tourist attraction. Residents and tourists walk out to the lighthouse, hoping to escape the summer heat and enjoy sweeping views of the city, while fishermen cast their lines from it.

But the deteriorating condition of the breakwater has officials concerned. For years, they

Breakwater needs to be rebuilt, Army Corps says

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
Wednesday, 07 August 2013 17:44

have unsuccessfully attempted to get the Army Corps to repair it.

Representatives of the Corps of Engineers inspected the breakwater in June, and their report makes it clear that something needs to be done soon.

The report divides the north breakwater into seven segments, and lists three of them as failed. Those areas on the eastern-most end has structural cracks that “severely compromise the structural integrity” of the breakwater, the report states.

“As these areas weaken and ultimately fail, the structure becomes unstable and presents a major safety hazard to anyone walking along the surface,” according to the report.

Some of these cracks form wedges of concrete that are prone to falling, the report states. In some cases, they have already fallen, and in those areas “the structure does not protect the harbor as designed. Subjecting many of the deteriorated areas to several more freeze-thaw cycles may result in complete failure.”

While inspecting the breakwater, inspectors noted that a large concrete wedge was loose, the report states. They poked it with a crowbar and the 10-foot-long wedge fell into the water.

“If a person had stepped on that piece of concrete, they would probably have been in the water with the concrete, and it is possible that they could be seriously hurt,” the report states.

“With the cracks in the concrete creating severe tripping hazards and the falling wedges creating a narrower surface to walk on, the chances that someone falls into the water increases with each wave.”

The report also notes that the existing safety ladders need to be repaired and additional ones installed. During the inspection, there were two partial safety ladders along a 770-foot section of the breakwater. One of the ladders was missing the top two or three rungs, and the other was missing the bottom three or more rungs.

“No one would be able to grab a rung if they fell into the water there,” the report states. “It would be very dangerous if someone were to trip and/or fall into the lake in this section as the water is approximately 10 feet deep on the lake side ... there are no functional ladders for over 800 feet.”

The report also notes that the concrete columns supporting the lighthouse are deteriorating.

“Repairs to those columns need to be made soon so that further deterioration does not affect the aid to navigation,” according to the report.

The report has already been reviewed by the Army Corps’ Detroit and Cincinnati offices and is making its way through the department on its way to Congress, where officials hope repairs will be placed in a future budget, he noted.

Breakwater needs to be rebuilt, Army Corps says

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
Wednesday, 07 August 2013 17:44

Ald. Bill Driscoll noted that the report repeatedly uses such phrases as “serious deterioration,” “no longer functions as designed,” and “immediate action is needed.”

“Certainly we’ve got just cause (to justify repairs),” he said. “We should have priority.”

Officials from the Army Corps have said it will take at least two years to fund the repairs, Driscoll said.

“That’s why this is so urgent to me,” he said. “We’ve got to get this placed in the budget.”

The report is encouraging, Driscoll said, but it also underscores the need for the city to continue pressing the issue.

“This was the first step,” he said. “We’ve got to keep going from here.”