

Rockaway Street Slope Failure

BOONTON — Residents spent an hour and a half last night asking questions and airing concerns about a proposed \$2 million project to repair a collapsed slope in Grace Lord Park.

Town leaders said they held the meeting to gather input from the public on the collapsed river bank that has existed as an 85-foot drop since Hurricane Irene in 2011.

Resident Mike Boudway, who lives above the failure line on Rockaway Street, said he felt his home shake when the slope collapsed. "This issue has kept us up many sleepless nights," he said.

He said continual erosion can be heard from the site when trees fall. As far as he is concerned, he doesn't want leaders to "gamble with the town's money" by ignoring the problem any longer.

The town hired Boswell Engineering for \$85,000 to analyze the situation and come up with a fix. The firm handled a similar repair in Oakland and recommends a tiered-wall solution.

The project would last 50 years and withstand another storm of Hurricane Irene's magnitude, according to Boswell's Jonathan Gerardo.

Based on the average assessed home of \$359,000 the repairs, if paid over 30 years, would cost about a tax point, said Alderman Michael Eoga.

"That would be 40 extra dollars per year for 30 years, or about almost two-thirds of last year's tax increase," Eoga said.

Rockaway Street resident Tess Callahan said Grace Lord Park is a cultural center for Boonton, and the park is at the heart of the town's identity.

"If you were to go to the town's website, the banner that pops up is an image of the park. Signs commemorating the town's 150th birthday depict the Rockaway River," said Callahan. "To fail to restore and protect the town's greatest asset would be to undermine our own best interests."

However, not everyone was sold on the cost of repairs.

Former Alderwoman Patricia Bujtas, who also lives on Rockaway Street said although she thinks the slope will need to be fixed in the future, she said she's against funding the project. She added she is worried the current administration will give it a green light regardless of public input.

"Before any public hearing I knew exactly the way I was going to vote. It didn't matter how many people came up and spoke because I knew what I wanted to do and what I felt was right for the citizens of the town," Bujtas said. "But I really believe that you were elected to defend and protect the taxpayers of the town of Boonton...It is very difficult to stay and live and pay taxes in New Jersey. You should really consider this before you make a decision."

Mayor Mathew DiLauri said he does not come to meetings knowing how he is going to vote and that the spirit of this "conversation" was to listen and not vote.

"We did list Oct. 2 as the vote date," he said. "But there are a lot of other options that come forward listening to the public that need to be explored. The vote should really be put off until we can look at each other and say that we have explored every option possible."

Resident Stephanie Gabelmann said before the night's meeting she didn't want the town to be "on the hook" for the repairs, but after hearing about the park's importance, she was "torn."

"I think it needs to be explored further," she said, adding she would like another meeting and then a vote on the issue.

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