



## Beach Driving at Risk In Truck Beach Stance

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No matter where one might stand on the question of Napeague Truck Beach, it is likely that no one is going to be happy once the verdict is announced in the ongoing lawsuit, probably at the end of the summer.

A group of property owners sued East Hampton Town and the town trustees seeking to end the summer weekend use of a 4,000-foot-long stretch of sand as a de facto bathing beach and truck parking area. The defense has countered that beach driving is not only a tradition but enshrined in assurances that date to colonial times.

The fact is, though, that where once one might have seen no more than a handful of trucks on the beach east of Napeague Lane on a summer's day, now there can be more than 100. Times have changed; there are far more four-wheel-drive vehicles here than a generation ago. Anyone who claims otherwise is just not remembering what it was like in, say, the 1970s and 1980s.

East Hampton Town officials are at fault for not taking steps to head off what they should have recognized was coming — a confrontation between homeowners and Truck Beach users. With as many as 100,000 people in East Hampton Town on a sunny summer weekend, it should be obvious that policies have to change to keep up. The town should have found an appropriate location years ago for an additional ocean beach for residents; one that is not plunked in front of other residents' houses. Instead, the trustees and Town Hall have sided with the beach-driving crowd, not really understanding that other taxpayers deserve consideration, too.

Instead of finding a practical solution, the town appears ready to condemn the disputed beachfront, which is risky. Condemnation advocates say the price will be minimal; the property owners who are suing warn that it could run into the tens of millions or more. A court will ultimately decide. However, even if the town manages to buy Truck Beach, a huge legal problem will remain, namely that proper health code procedures for creating a bathing beach have not been followed there and that a court might decide that the unrestrained use of the beach by those who arrive by truck is a public nuisance. In a worst case scenario, all but the most limited beach driving might well be at risk depending on what a judge decides.

Meanwhile, at Three Mile Harbor, some residents have begun to complain about trucks parking on a small, flat portion of sand inside the breakwaters. No matter that the beach is easily accessible from the public parking area at Maidstone Park, some folks act as if it were a fundamental right to roll down and park on the beach. Frankly, to our eye, it is terrible to see trucks backed up there nearly to water's edge. It seems completely unnecessary for anyone to drive a truck onto that beach, unless perhaps it is someone with a valid handicapped permit.

Leadership is needed now to guide the battle over Truck Beach, and other increasingly abused stretches like at Three Mile Harbor, to a solution that works for all. Unfortunately, town officials, eager to capitulate to the four-wheelers, may be setting themselves up for an even greater loss — one that ultimately brings an end to the hard-fought, 350-plus years of public use of the beaches for such purposes as surfcasting and commercial fishing. By digging in so firmly, the town and trustees are running the risk of losing the whole thing.