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general management plan Fire Island National Seashore

INTRODUCTION

Fire Island, a 32-mile-long barrier island paralleling the southern shore of Long Island, New York, has long provided an exceptional recreational resource to the residents of the New York metropolitan area (see figure 1). In 1964, in the midst of widespread controversy over proposals for a highway extending the length of Fire Island, Congress designated approximately 26 miles of this barrier island as Fire Island National Seashore.

The national seashore has within its authorized boundary a variety of landowners and governmental jurisdictions, including 17 private residential communities, several town-owned beaches, a highly used county park, and a long segment of county-owned beach. The communities are subject to indirect federal control, while private inholdings are subject to more direct control by the National Park Service. Robert Moses State Park on the western end of the island is not included within the national seashore.

Planning for the use of Fire Island National Seashore was begun in 1964. Since that time several plans have been proposed: The first plan was prepared in 1965, but it was not until 1967 that a plan was first adopted; and additional planning was initiated in 1971. Three plans have been proposed since 1971, none of which has received substantial public support. This general management plan is the result of planning efforts begun in July 1975. It outlines an environmentally sound management basis for the national seashore to ensure the protection and perpetuation of the beaches, dunes, and other natural features as well as to provide reasonable access and facilities for public day-use recreation.

The relationships between the 17 exempted communities, the several town- and county-owned beaches, and the National Park Service have remained ill-defined and subject to widespread individual conjecture. This plan proposes to rectify

land-use control problems through clarification of zoning ordinances and responsible authorities, through certain cooperative management agreements, and in some cases through direct land acquisition. The plan identifies the role of the federal and local governments in setting and enforcing zoning regulations.

The seashore presently receives mostly day-use recreation, largely during the summer season; some off-season use also occurs because of the temperate climate and year-round recreation opportunities such as surf-fishing and beachcombing. Preservation of traditional uses, diversification of recreational and interpretive/educational opportunities, and determination of maximum visitation levels for federal activity areas are listed in the planning proposals.

Most national seashore visitors who do not own or have access to private boats use ferries from the mainland to reach federal activity areas. The National Park Service has no mainland transportation staging facilities and almost no contact with visitors before they reach the island. Consequently, a proposal for developing a headquarters complex and mainland ferry terminal is included in this plan.

There is no continuous hard-surfaced road running the length of Fire Island, and the two causeways from Long Island – one ending at a paved parking area in a state park at the extreme western end of Fire Island, and the other at a parking lot in a county park at the eastern end – provide the only means of automobile access. Vehicular circulation on Fire Island is restricted to travel along the beach and through dune crossings into communities and recreational developments. The regulation of vehicular traffic on the beach by both the towns and the National Park Service has been a long-standing source of controversy. Thus, vehicle use and regulation is a major subject of this general management plan.

Since Fire Island functions to some degree as a barrier shielding the urbanized communities along the south shore of Long Island from the damaging impacts of hurricanes and extratropical storms (northeasters), the flood protective role of the island has been considered in the management proposals for Fire Island. In addition, transportation plans and resources management proposals have taken into account potential impacts on the shellfishing industry, which is one of the major industries of the Great South Bay.

Because of the complex land-use patterns, landownerships, development patterns, and the number of governmental authorities affecting Fire Island, continuing dialogue and cooperation between the National Park Service and the numerous interests affected by Park Service activities on Fire Island are critical to the long-term success of coastal-zone planning in the region. Consequently, cooperative planning needs are considered throughout the plan. Only a high level of cooperation among all parties concerned about the future of Fire Island will assure the success of this general management plan.

