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OCEAN STATE Q&A



MEREDITH HAAS, RHODE ISLAND SEA GRANT

Bryan Oakley of Eastern Connecticut State University heads out to sample and survey beaches on Block Island.

Understanding erosion on Block Island

URI study to decode coastal climate change over the last century

Block Island, a “geological cousin” to Long Island, Martha’s Vineyard, Nantucket, and Cape Cod, is made up of two large glacial deposits laid down more than 20,000 years ago. The island’s iconic Mohegan Bluffs is a glacial till that came later, made from debris left behind by the Ice Age more than 11,000 years ago.

The 150-foot cliffs have retreated hundreds of feet over the past century, as sand and gravel erodes along the coastline.

But what looks like destruction is actually replenishment, according to the University of Rhode Island’s Coastal Institute. The sand and gravel that pushes the bluff back is keeping the beaches alive, according to Nathan Vinhateiro, science director of the Coastal Institute and a research professor at URI’s Graduate School of Oceanography. A new study, currently in progress, will “decode over a century of coastal change” on Block Island, according to a statement from the school.

“The data from this project will be instrumental for planning efforts that bolster the island’s physical and economic resiliency,” Vinhateiro said in the statement. “Understanding coastal dynamics is essential for protecting both the natural systems and the tourism economy that Block Island depends on.”

Vinhateiro is partnering with URI students and Bryan Oakley, chairman of the Environmental Earth Science department at Eastern Connecticut State University. A geoscientist trained in glacial, coastal, and marine deposits, Vinhateiro talked to the Globe about the upcoming project, which will investigate the bluff-beach connection using maps going back to 1886.

Q. Hordes of people visit Block Island during the summer months. What might they not know about the island’s environment and how its affected by climate change?

A. The challenges from climate change that Block Island faces are similar to those in many other communities in the Northeast. You’ve got a lot of coastal infrastructure that’s right on the coastline: roads, bridges, culverts, even an old landfill that’s eroding. You have limitations on the availability of fresh water because the island’s aquifer sits on top of saltwater. ... Except for water bot-

ties and things like that, all of the island’s drinking water comes from six drinking water wells that are maintained by the town, what’s called the Block Island Water Co., and those are on a reverse osmosis system, because they’re deep enough that they draw a brackish water source. Most of the island’s private residences outside of the little area around the downtown, around the harbor, are served by private wells.

Some of the things people who visit Block Island may not see about their climate challenges — the main threats to the coastal infrastructure — is their loss of coastal buffer zones like marshes and barriers spits from erosion, from storms, and passive loss from long-term sea level rise. In addition to water availability and sand salinization issues, there are issues with septic system failures because of rising sea levels.

Q. The bluffs on Block Island can be seen as one comes in on the ferry. What kind of relationship is there between the bluffs and beaches?

A. We tend to think of erosion as a negative thing, but in a sediment-starved environment, like we have here on the South Shore of Rhode Island, we don’t really have any major rivers delivering sediment to the system. On Block Island, the only way to introduce new sediment to the beach is by it eroding from an upland source. Those eroding bluffs are what provides the sediment source for a lot of the beaches that Block Island is famous for, like Crescent Beach on the northeast side of the island, or the beach in front of Ballards.

Q. What is shoreline armoring and how does it interrupt Block Island’s natural sediment flow?

A. Part of this project is to kind of get a first-order estimate of these fluxes of sediment, but the other part is to look into ways that armoring the shoreline, whether it’s through stabilization of a bluff or an inlet into the harbor, is interrupting the normal flow of sediment. This could be by limiting it — preventing new sediment from being introduced — or by catching it, like what happens in the harbor.

Q. If an individual decides to armor their bluff to protect their property, would that affect the island in general?

A. Even if its permitted, I should say it still has major implications on sediment transport and availability. Whenever you stabilize a shoreline, there’s a number of ways that you lose sediment. The first is what’s called placement loss, where you lose the pre-existing beach because of the impoundment of sediment. The bluff or

beach can no longer erode and it cannot contribute material to the longshore system. You often have accelerated erosion adjacent to the structure because of wave refraction or reflection from impacting the structure. There’s scouring effects that happen nearby. And any time you put a perpendicular structure into the water, you interrupt longshore transport and you can often see this by looking at aerial photos. Sediment builds up on one side of a perpendicular structure, and then it’s eroded on the on the other side of it. It impacts adjacent properties and there’s also the potential loss of public access because the shoreline naturally erodes. You’re going to eventually interrupt the ability of the public to laterally access the coastline.

Q. How does community involvement help this project?

A. That’s instrumental to this project and this project’s success. We have partnered with Block Island through the town committee called the Coastal Resilience Committee. From the very beginning of this project, and even prior to when we started to develop the demonstration site framework for Block Island, we have been meeting regularly to make sure that whatever research and funding we can bring to the island is going to help them address their most pressing concerns. They are very concerned about the sediment impoundment, and erosion and threats to Corn Neck Road. That’s essentially the only connection between the north side of the island and the south side.

Q. How will this research help Block Island and state leaders decide where to protect, where to retreat, and where to draw the line on hardening of the coast?

A. There’s going to be some permanent armament on portions of Block Island, but hopefully with the right information, both the town, this committee, and the state itself, through the Coastal Resources Management Council, can make informed decisions about where that sort of armament is necessary, where it’s going to be better to retreat from the shoreline, where there are options to relocate infrastructure, and where it will be important to put limitations or introduce new policies that limit shoreline protection, particularly around eroding sources that that feed the island beaches.

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R.I. judge refers DOJ lawyers for discipline over transgender records

By **Steph Machado**
GLOBE STAFF

PROVIDENCE — A federal judge in Rhode Island has referred Justice Department lawyers to disciplinary proceedings after accusing the federal government of making “false representations” in a case involving the medical records of transgender children and teens.

US District Court Judge Mary S. McElroy issued the order on June 5, citing “the representations made to this court” by the DOJ attorneys.

In a hearing on May 12, she had slammed the lawyers for not giving a Texas judge all of the relevant information before asking him to order Rhode Island Hospital to turn over the private medical records — including names — of children and teens treated for gender dysphoria over the past five years.

McElroy’s referral comes after a separate Rhode Island case in which the DOJ failed to disclose to Rhode Island US District Court Judge Melissa DuBose that an undocumented immigrant was wanted for murder in the Dominican Republic. Without that information, DuBose released the man, and now no one can find him.

“We are at the end of our tether with the DOJ making false representations to this court,” McElroy said May 12.

In a subsequent ruling the next day quashing the DOJ’s subpoena for the medical records, McElroy wrote that “the discrepancy between the honorable conduct expected of federal prosecutors and DOJ’s tactics in this case is unsettling.”

The Justice Department was seeking expansive medical records of an undisclosed number of minors who received gender-affirming care such as puberty blockers in the state’s largest hospital system, which treats children at Hasbro Children’s Hospital in Providence. The demand specifically sought the names, parents’ names, diagnoses, and Social Security numbers of the patients.

The Trump administration has been trying to track down the records of transgender medical treatment of minors across the country since last year, but has been blocked by judges in seven different federal districts, including Massachusetts.

McElroy called the investigation a “fishing expedition” and said the subpoena was issued in “bad faith.” She also said the DOJ misled the Texas judge, Reed O’Connor, by claiming that Rhode Island Hospital had not communicated with the Justice Department about the subpoena in months.

The hospital system and the DOJ had actually emailed about it two days prior to the Justice Department asking O’Connor to enforce the subpoena on April 30, which he did.

“This reckless disregard for the duty of candor owed to a federal court is appalling,” McElroy said.

After McElroy quashed the subpoena, O’Connor ordered Rhode Island Hospital to turn the records over to him directly, and said he would not release them to the Justice Department unless they win an appeal. The hospital system, which has also appealed O’Connor’s ruling, has begun sending the records to Texas, but did not release patient identities.

The Justice Department is appealing McElroy’s ruling, and said her al-

legations of misrepresentations were “without merit.”

“Such accusations against department attorneys are rare and serious,” a DOJ press release said. “Our attorneys did not misrepresent facts, withhold relevant information, or otherwise mislead the Court.”

McElroy also accused the Justice Department of “shopping” the case to Texas despite the subpoena being issued to a Rhode Island hospital. She called the move “dirty pool.”

She also criticized a senior attorney who was at the hearing and “sat silently by as his counterpart, a junior attorney who has been practicing law for approximately six months and had no relevant information, was forced to answer questions about DOJ’s blatant disregard for the proper course of negotiations.”

The Justice Department has defended its decision to enforce the Rhode Island subpoena in Northern Texas, arguing the underlying investigation is based there.

The DOJ has said its investigation is looking into alleged “misbranding” of FDA-approved drugs for unapproved uses, in this case, as puberty blockers for young people with gender dysphoria.

Doctors are legally allowed to prescribe FDA-approved drugs off-label — a medication approved for one health problem to treat a different one — and commonly do so for conditions ranging from weight loss to cancer.

Brantley Mayers, a Justice Department attorney, acknowledged in the May 12 hearing that off-label prescribing is legal, but said the agency was looking into whether pharmaceutical companies were providing “financial incentives” for the doctors to prescribe the drugs.

He said the DOJ preferred to get the names of the children and their parents so they could potentially interview them in the case.

Child advocates argue the disclosure would amount to outing transgender youth, and would violate their privacy.

NYU Langone, a hospital system in New York City, confirmed in May it received a grand jury subpoena from Northern Texas, which indicates that a criminal investigation is underway.

The subpoenas to Rhode Island Hospital and other hospital systems last summer had been administrative, not from grand juries.

McElroy’s June 5 order means the active federal judges of Rhode Island’s District Court will review the alleged misconduct of the lawyers and “determine the appropriate course of action,” said Frank Perry, a spokesperson for the court.

Perry said the options include referring the lawyers to a disciplinary agency, ordering an investigation, providing notice to the attorney of the alleged misconduct, or commencing formal disciplinary proceedings.

Asked for comment on the referral, DOJ spokesperson Natalie Baldassarre pointed to her previous comments, where she told the Globe that McElroy’s “attack on the professionalism and integrity of DOJ attorneys is outrageous and unjustified.”

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Partners break ground for ‘hopeful’ multi-use redevelopment of N.H. church’s land

By **Steven Porter**
GLOBE STAFF

PORTSMOUTH, N.H. — A diverse group of partners from secular and religious groups broke hallowed ground together June 8 to redevelop a small Christian congregation’s 3.5-acre property to meet some of the community’s most pressing needs.

The plans for Christ Episcopal Church’s land call for not only a new worship space, but also 44 units of workforce housing, an early childhood education center, and a new headquarters and transitional housing space for HAVEN, a nonprofit that serves people impacted by domestic and sexual abuse.

“This property is being reimagined for housing, healing, worship, and long-term community care,” the Right Rev. A. Robert Hirschfeld, bishop of the Episcopal Church of New Hampshire, said during the groundbreaking ceremony. “At a time when communities everywhere are struggling with housing affordability, safety, belonging, and the future of faith-owned spaces, this partnership offers something rare and hopeful.”

The bold vision, years in the making, was nearly derailed by the wishes of one man, John Elwyn Stone, who died five decades ago. When he donated the land on which the church building was constructed in the 1960s, Stone stipulated that it must be used exclusively for “ecclesiastical purposes.” Otherwise, the land would need to be taken back

and set aside instead as a tree farm, bird sanctuary, or wildlife preservation.

Stone’s trustee at TD Bank concluded in 2024 that the multi-use project would run afoul of the conditions he had placed on his donation. But the parish sued in 2025, arguing that the project represents “an organic expression” of its ecclesiastical purpose. Then the bank dropped its opposition, allowing the project to move forward.

That legal wrangling underscored the historical significance of the church’s land, showing how Colonial-era power structures continue to shape modern life.

Stone had inherited the land as a direct descendant of John Langdon Jr., who served as a member of the Continental Congress, a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, a US senator, and a governor of New Hampshire. Historical records indicate Langdon’s father enslaved people who likely lived and worked on the family farm in Portsmouth, according to the book “Black Portsmouth,” by Mark



PHOTOS BY STEVEN PORTER/GLOBE STAFF (LEFT), LASSEL ARCHITECTS (ABOVE)

The church (left) on the site planned for new worship space, workforce housing, an early childhood center, and a headquarters for HAVEN (above).

J. Sammons and Valerie Cunningham. The farm stayed in Langdon’s family for hundreds of years.

Now the Black Heritage Trail of New Hampshire has a historical marker on the church’s property in memory of four of the enslaved people — Hannah, Pomp, Nanne, and Violet — who were buried on the site. JerriAnne Boggis, the trail’s executive director, said this partnership shows how to honor history while pursuing social progress and repair.

Kathy Beebe, executive director for HAVEN, said her team aims to secure permission for initial occupancy roughly one year from now. Meanwhile, the Portsmouth Housing Authority expects to complete construction on the workforce residential units in late summer 2027.

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