

Sands of time

■ North Beach is not the place to make a public stand against the Atlantic.

If ever a photograph were worth a thousand words, it was the aerial shot of the new breach in the North Beach section of Nauset Beach, the barrier beach off Chatham, in the June 6 paper.

Taken in April, when a storm first punched through, it shows waves foaming and water pouring through, carrying a wispy trail of sand and bubbles landward into the town's large harbor and Pleasant Bay.

It's worse now: The opening is 600 feet wide with no signs of closing back in, an early prediction. Seen from above, in the full context of the ocean, the sand strip's insubstantial quality is clear. Plugging that hole with dredged sand will be a fool's errand, like trying to hold back the tide with a child's tin beach pail and plastic shovel.

There is another view, of course, on shore at ground level. From there, putting up a fight makes more sense. For the owners of traditional "camps" on the spit, now cut off, and ORV drivers who picnic in grand isolation, the beach seems terra firma, unchanged in living memory. And on the mainland, owners of more than a hundred waterfront homes walk their property and worry about the damage higher tides and stronger ocean waves will do.

A dredge-and-fill project is mechanically feasible — a channel through the harbor is dredged frequently, and the sand can just as well be pumped into the breach. The cost would be about \$2 million. Town Meeting will decide whether to put town money on the line June 30.

Coastal geologist Graham Giese — who lost some of his “expert” capital with the early prediction of a natural closure — now estimates the sand Band-Aid would buy time, 10 to 20 years, in which homeowners could beef up their revetments and sea walls. But there is at least an even chance the new breach will grow and replace the one that cut through farther south in 1987.

In fact, nobody can predict where the swirling sand that erodes along the “Great Backside” will settle, only that it’s always on the move, twice a day, in and out, while humans dream of other things. One lesson of Outer Cape history is that the shore erodes and the spit migrates. Even landmark structures like Highland Light have to be jacked up and put on rails and moved inland.

“The sand here has a life of its own, even if it is only a life borrowed from the wind,” wrote naturalist Henry Beston in 1928 during a year in his “Outermost House.” That cottage fell to the sea in the great storm of 1978, when winds hit 92 miles an hour in Chatham.

We’re taught not to build our foundations on sand. And we accept that our sand castles are only for an afternoon. A waterfront home is a precious thing (some \$360 million in valuation lies along the now-exposed North Chatham shore), but it comes with no guarantee.

All this makes the barrier beach too impermanent a place to make a stand. It’s certainly too risky a place to stake taxpayer money. And a patch job would be out of tune with the National Seashore’s ethic of letting nature take its course. Better the Chatham homeowners make their stand in their front yards.