LONG ISLAND / SUFFOLK

Southampton Town dives into project to save aging piers in Shinnecock Bay

Leilani Elias, from left, treasurer of the Long Island Divers Association, Southampton Town Supervisor Jay Schneiderman and Barry Lipsky, president of the divers association, cut an underwater ribbon during a Sept. 30 ceremony marking the renovation of the Ponquogue Piers in Hampton Bays. Photo Credit: Eco-Photo Explorers

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Updated October 6, 2019 6:00 AM

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Two old piers jutting into Shinnecock Bay are the ruins of a defunct drawbridge, but members of Long Island's diving community know they also host a vibrant ecosystem beneath the surface and were worth saving.

The twin structures, remnants of the Old Ponquogue Bridge in Hampton Bays and a popular spot for fishing and scuba diving, have been rehabilitated and will be officially unveiled Friday in a ceremony. The piers were heavily damaged during superstorm Sandy in October 2012 and were initially slated for demolition — until 2014, when divers and residents convinced Southampton Town officials they were worth saving.

"The diving community really came out and made the town aware there was significant marine life underneath," said Town Supervisor Jay Schneiderman, who donned a dive suit and joined two members of the diving community to cut an underwater ribbon during a special underwater ceremony on Sept. 30. "The tide turned, so to speak."

Work included replacing and reinforcing pilings, installing hand rails and replacing the wood decking, according to the town website. Town officials expect the Federal Emergency Management Agency will reimburse the approximately $2 million renovation cost, as the agency has earmarked nearly $5 million for the project.

Barry Lipsky, president of the Long Island Divers Association, a 40-year-old organization that has about 2,000 members, said the artificial reef among the south pier offers the best Long Island diving. Lipsky noted the Gulf Stream can bring tropical fish to the area in September through tides moving in and out of Shinnecock Inlet. He spotted two butterfly fish, a small and brightly colored tropical species, during the ribbon cutting, he said.

"It would have been an absolute tragedy if the bridge was removed," he said. "You can see fish that you would normally only see in Florida."

It's also an accessible dive site. Divers can walk into the bay without chartering a boat, and there is ample parking near the piers. The only time appropriate for diving, however, is slack tide, a 45-minute period when the water does not flow.

The piers reach out into deep water, making it a favorite spot for recreational and commercial fishing, said Ed Warner Jr., president of the Southampton Town Trustees. The surrounding park is named for his father, Ed Warner Sr., a bayman and longtime town trustee who died in 2006.

The old span was constructed in 1930 and fell into disrepair over time. Suffolk County built a taller, stationary concrete bridge in 1986 to allow for boat traffic to travel through without interrupting vehicle traffic. The middle of the old bridge was removed and the timber piers were turned over to the town in 1988.

Schneiderman noted the renovation is one of the latest efforts to revitalize the tourism economy in Hampton Bays. Other initiatives include the renovation of the Ponquogue Beach pavilion and a plan to buy a blighted motel and find a developer to build luxury condos in its place.

"There are a lot of potential attractions for vacationers," Schneiderman said.

PONQUOGUE PIERS
Remnants of an old bridge built in 1930 and decommissioned when the current bridge was built in 1986

Popular spot for fishing and scuba diving

Serves as an artificial reef attracting marine life such as anemones, sea stars and purple urchins

Damaged during superstorm Sandy in October 2012 and rebuilt with $2 million in FEMA money

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