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A Much Criticized Pocket of the Rockaways, Built to Survive a Storm

By *COREY KILGANNON*

The morning after Hurricane Sandy battered the Rockaways last month, Phil Coxon, 70, who lives just off the water there, walked out his front door, "and it looked like any other day," he said.

Sure, there had been some street flooding from encroaching sea waters, but nothing like the torrents that rushed head-high through many neighborhoods elsewhere on the Rockaway Peninsula, turning the area into a near-wasteland of flooded and wrecked homes and submerged cars.

Sure, the howling winds snapped one of Mr. Coxon's shingles off, but nothing like the widespread wind damage to homes and stores farther away, in areas that still resemble a war zone.

Mr. Coxon and most of his hundreds of neighbors suffered no real flooding or damage to their homes. They live in a newer area called Arverne by the Sea, a vast \$1 billion oceanfront development between Beach 62nd and 80th Streets that is home to over 1,000 families and is one of the largest residential development projects underway in New York City. It has also been much criticized, for its size, its ostentatious appearance and the quality of its housing.

In the days after the storm, things seemed almost idyllic within much of Arverne's 117-acre footprint, compared with the mess and chaos in the rest of the Rockaways. Mr. Coxon said he was not surprised.

"I bought into this place because of the way it was built," said Mr. Coxon, a marketing consultant who moved into his \$700,000 townhouse in March, with his wife, Daria Mainetti, after living 20 years in Jackson Heights, Queens.

The development lies within evacuation Zone A, but Mr. Coxon and many of his neighbors ignored the city's order to leave. While power remained out for more than a week, they formed group patrols to deter looters.

Arverne by the Sea has been controversial dating well before 2004 when people started moving in, including a longstanding criticism that the houses were of poor quality. It was the mantra of many dyed-in-the-wool Rockaway-ites that these pretty, modern homes were really flimsy matchboxes that would blow over in the first big storm.

But the development, which is eventually expected to include 2,300 two-family houses and condominiums, also weathered Tropical Storm Irene last year.

"I heard it all from the beginning, people saying, 'Ah, they're building junk,'" said Gerry Ronski, the development's project executive. "But bottom line: Our system worked, because we planned from the very beginning to withstand this kind of thing."

"We've already seen interest from Breezy Point residents whose homes were destroyed - looking for something safer," Mr. Ronski said, referring to a Rockaway neighborhood several miles to the west that was particularly decimated by the storm.

Mr. Ronski said that a heavy-duty, sophisticated drainage system, designed to handle flood surges, was instrumental in mitigating flooding. The system -- which features underground chambers, wide street mains and storm drains on each house property -- connects to large sewer mains that the developer installed in public streets that they rebuilt around the project site, as part of an agreement with the city, Mr. Ronski said. Also helpful was a natural buffer of sand and beach grass that was maintained near the boardwalk. It also helped that much of the boardwalk in front of the project stayed intact to break the roaring surf, unlike the long stretch west of 88th Street that was obliterated.

"Even back in the planning phases, there was talk of global warming and rising sea levels and all that," Mr. Ronski said. "We knew we'd have to engineer it specifically, and go above and beyond the building requirements, to make it hurricane-proof."

Instead of overhead power lines, the developer put in underground utility lines, and installed submersible transformers, Mr. Ronski said. Homes in the development got power back sooner than much of the rest of the Rockaways, parts of which still remain in the dark. Water never rose to the electrical meters, and the developer hired electricians to inspect the homes, to make sure they were able to receive power.

Before building, the developer raised the entire area with a half-million cubic yards of fill, essentially raising the entire neighborhood five feet higher than it had been, said Michael Dubb, principal of the Beechwood Organization, a partner with the Benjamin Development Company in developing the project along with Denise Coyle, principal of the Benjamin Companies.

The development's houses are built with steel framing and are covered with cement-composite shingles. They rest on concrete-slab foundations rooted with wooden pilings, and have hurricane-grade windows, said Mr. Dubb, as he surveyed the streets on Wednesday.

"I built houses in South Florida after Hurricane Andrew, and I knew I had to build this while keeping in mind the possibility of serious hurricanes," he said.

The development's performance is particularly intriguing because of the curious role it has in the Rockaways, where it strikes a contrast against the modest houses, rustic

bungalows, public housing projects and faded high-rises around it.

The Arverne complex resembles a sleepy development in the Carolinas, rising slowly like a bouquet of fake flowers -- a utopian set from "The Truman Show." Its micro-neighborhoods have names like Ocean Breeze, Palmers Landing and the Breakers. And its newly mapped streets have names like Spinnaker Drive. Its white picket fences, ornamental trellises and rooftop deck railings and fencings are made of plastic.

"But look how sturdy it is, said Mr. Coxon, standing on his fourth-floor roof deck and looking out at the now-calm ocean. "It did what it was supposed to do."