

The Boston Globe

Living on edge comes with a view - and a risk **as published in *The Boston Globe***

By James Vaznis
Globe Staff/February 21, 2008



Kevin Donovan is building a retaining wall to protect his home in Plymouth that offers a panoramic oceanfront view. (Globe Staff Photo / Matthew J. Lee)

A two-bedroom oceanfront home with an asking price of \$150,000? What a steal!

But Kevin Donovan, a 52-year-old motorcycle parts store owner, offered \$25,000 less and, much to his surprise, the owner accepted it on the spot.

The deal, a year ago November, came with one potentially huge downside: The Cape-style house in Plymouth was about to topple over a 200-foot sandy bluff and into the ocean below. The front deck had already plummeted down the steep slope during a ferocious storm, leaving the first two steps of the concrete staircase dangling over the cliff.

But Donovan says he has no regrets about making the home on Nameloc Road his own. In fact, he has anointed a theme song for his new life in the house: Aerosmith's "Living on the Edge."

"I love living on the edge," said Donovan, adding, "The view is just breathtaking. Being so high you can see fish swimming in the water. There are days it looks like the Caribbean out there. . . . I'm not worried about going down the cliff at all."

Like most cliff dwellers, Donovan is not standing by waiting for Mother Nature to claim his house. He is trying to stop her.

Over the past several months, Donovan has spent over \$131,000 - more than the purchase price - to build a 21-foot-high stone wall at the base of the bluff to prevent the ocean from nibbling away the sand.

Donovan, who is 6 feet 1 and a lean 190 pounds, has undertaken the Herculean job himself, using an innovative approach that he says draws upon techniques used by the Egyptians.

He has filled 350 steel cages known as gabion baskets with tons of rocks, 4 to 8 inches in diameter. Each basket holds about 3,000 pounds; they are stacked atop one another up the base of the slope.

The idea of the stone-filled baskets is to allow the ocean water to flow in and out of the wall. It may seem counter intuitive to build a porous wall, Donovan said, but it prevents water trapped behind the wall from pushing out a stone as the ocean recedes, which can happen with a traditional stone revetment.

"It's a massive job, but you chip away at it every day," said Donovan, taking a break from construction one recent morning.

The baskets won't be noticed by beach-goers in the summer because they will be covered with sand, and trees and shrubs will be planted on top, he says.

Construction, which began in the fall and concluded last month, came with immense challenges and risks.

Because the bluff is so steep - it has a 36 degree angle - rocks could not be hauled down to the beach by truck. So Donovan built a long yellow chute, the kind demolition crews use in the tops of tall buildings to drop debris into a dumpster on the ground. The rocks rolling from the top of the bluff to the beach make a thundering noise.

To get the steel cages to the beach, he bought a flat boat to travel between his beach front and a distributor in Bourne. The wakes from passing ships often threaten to sink the boat, especially when it's carrying a typical load of 50 cages, which weigh about 1,200 pounds.

"I've been swamped a couple of times and got stuck in a storm once," Donovan said.

Donovan's just-finished wall has amazed his neighbors.

"Kevin, God love him, went at it like a madman," said Tony Bosari, a maintenance supervisor for a demolition company who owns two houses on the bluff. "Kevin's idea is that wall will be there as long as he is."

Bosari said he has full confidence that Donovan will be right, and Bosari shares in Donovan's pioneer-like spirit. Bosari will soon embark on building two sea walls at the base of the bluff on which his houses are perched. Bosari already has moved both houses back about 25 feet. Like Donovan, Bosari is a relative newcomer to the bluff.

"I would not want to live anywhere else," said Bosari, who is married and has a 7-year-old child and a 10-month-old baby. "When we look at the house we are in now, we knew it was our dream house, the one we wanted to pass down to our children."

Donovan said he expects the wall to hold up for decades.

"Maybe when I'm 90 I might need to make repairs," he said.

Yet Donovan concedes that even the most sound solutions may not hold up under the severest of storms - like a Hurricane Bob or a Blizzard of '78. Donovan, though, doesn't even flinch at the prospect.

Donovan, who likes to pull a reclining armchair in front of a sliding glass door in his living room to watch massive storms tear up the bluff, said, "If the house goes down, I'll be along for the ride."

James Vaznis can be contacted at jvaznis@globe.com.

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