

ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

A Western Alaska village, long threatened by erosion and flooding, begins to relocate

Moving Newtok residents to the new village of Mertarvik has been planned for decades. This month, several families moved into new homes.

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NEWTOK — As night fell outside their small home, Sharon and Owen David cleaned by the dim light of a ceiling fixture. Plastic totes and boxes holding their belongings were stacked high against a wall. Trouble has been closing in on the house from all sides, and it was time to go.

To the south, the Ninglick River bank is encroaching, an unrelenting crumbling that creeps closer each year. It's about 75 feet from the Davids' front door.

The flats along the smaller Newtok River to the east often flood beneath the window. On the north and west, a network of boardwalks sags into the sodden tundra. A pedestrian stepping off the planks risks slogging in thigh-high mud.

Sharon said walking to pick berries is just a memory.

“Now it's like a little island where we can't go anywhere anymore,” Sharon said.

Newtok's relocation, necessary due to melting permafrost, sinking tundra and advancing erosion, has been talked about for decades, and not just here. The Yup'ik village near the Bering Sea coast in Western Alaska has been the subject of numerous magazine stories and television reports looking to track the human toll of climate change from the front lines.

For all the discussion and planning, though, it had been hard to see progress over the years, Sharon said. Now the Davids can see a twinkling on the horizon at sundown. The lights are on in Mertarvik, 9 1/2 miles southeast across the Ninglick River.

“Look,” Sharon said as she wrapped up her work for the day. “You can see the new village.”

Long time coming

The effort to relocate Newtok reached a historic milestone on Oct. 12. That’s when its first families began to move. This fall, 21 households, totaling 137 people, will become the pioneering year-round residents of Mertarvik, the new village taking shape on a Nelson Island hillside upriver from where the Ninglick meets the Bering Sea.

It’s a project that will continue for years, officials say, but much has been done already. Mertarvik, which means “place to get water” in Yup’ik, now has a diesel power plant, a water treatment facility, a landing strip, fuel storage tanks, a barge landing and 21 homes.

Overlooking it all is a 9,600-square-foot evacuation center, a stout structure with a million-dollar view that could hold the whole village of about 370 people in case of emergency. The Mertarvik Evacuation Center, or MEC, will serve as the village’s temporary schoolhouse.

Planners say it’s all on solid ground.

“The geography of the land is all rock there,” said Romy Cadiente, relocation coordinator for the Newtok Village Council.

That’s where the differences between the old village and the new begin. Newtok homes are weather-worn and distressed, many compromised by failing foundations, others by black mold. Only a few are in suitable condition to be moved to Mertarvik. Seven Newtok homes have been torn down already before they could be toppled by the eroding land. Two would be in the water now if they hadn’t been torn down, according to Gavin Dixon, part of a four-person team from Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium who has helped manage the relocation effort for the past two years.

Power poles lean and lines droop dangerously. Residents haul clean water to their houses in jugs and carry their waste away in open buckets. Infrastructure investment in Newtok has been unattainable since the village’s demise seemed inevitable.

In Mertarvik, new 1,200- to 1,400-square-foot homes are built to sturdy modern standards on beds of rock quarried from a nearby hilltop. Though modest in size, they’re much bigger than what exists in Newtok’s overcrowded dwellings.



Though the village won't have centralized water and wastewater plumbing, residents will no longer use honey buckets. Each home will have a "portable alternative sanitation system," or PASS. It uses a 100-gallon holding tank, a rain catchment system, a low-flow sink and a separating drying toilet. Waste will still be hauled away, but the system is designed to minimize exposure to pathogens without the higher cost of a piped system.

It's complicated to calculate the total cost of moving an entire village, Cadiente said, and no number could account for the enormous logistic puzzles.

[More photos: Newtok residents start the move to Mertarvik]

The Denali Commission, an independent federal agency created by Congress to support rural Alaska development, has dedicated \$28.5 million to Newtok relocation, according to chief operating officer Chad Stovall.

Since 2018, Dixon said ANTHC has managed about \$29 million in design and construction, including Denali Commission funds, \$4 million from the state, \$900,000 from the United Methodist Committee on Relief and \$800,000 from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Innovative Readiness Training, a U.S. military effort, also provided an estimated \$1.6 million in value on its latest Mertarvik mission, Dixon said.

It's hard to say when the relocation will be complete. Determining that will involve answering difficult questions in the future, Dixon said. Is it done when the same number of homes are built that Newtok has now, or when there are homes enough to ease overcrowding? Is it when there is a comparable infrastructure to what Newtok has or when it meets the common standards of the rest of America's towns and cities?

Dixon said four major projects to complete include 44 housing units, estimated to cost \$12 million to \$16 million, an airport (\$30 million), a school (\$30 million or more) and a running water and sewer system (\$20 million).

"I think everybody is looking at what the people of Newtok have been able to do. What I hope they don't see is that, 'Well, Newtok did it. It was easy,'" said U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, who visited Mertarvik in summer. "It was not easy."

In many ways, Newtok's relocation is a test case for several other Alaska communities that may require relocation due to erosion.

"These are real threats that we have to address, and we need to have a bigger, more comprehensive plan as to how we're going to approach it," Murkowski said.

Newtok has long attracted media attention, some of which cast its residents as America's first climate change refugees.

"The whole state of Alaska is watching us, and the rest of the world is watching us," said Paul Charles, a Newtok Village Council member. He understands their reason.

"It doesn't get cold like it used to. Early spring, late freeze-up," Charles said. "To me that's climate change."

'It's just unbelievable that we're moving'

A clash of village leadership slowed relocation progress for years, some say. But talk of moving the village long predates that situation, decided by a federal appeals panel in 2015. Murkowski said the land exchange that transferred the Mertarvik site to Newtok village was the first piece of legislation she got passed as a senator. That was in 2003.

This month, residents expressed a broad range of emotions now that the moment had finally arrived to move.

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Bernice John said she first heard talk of moving the village in the 1980s and remembers when the riverbank was a long walk away. She looked forward to “new everything” in Mertarvik, and expressed concern only about moving her beloved house plants without damaging them.

In Mertarvik, John’s household, which includes nine others, will have a little more room to spread out.

“We don’t exactly have privacy in here,” she said as she prepared beef steaks, rice and canned vegetables.

Much closer to the Ninglick riverbank, David Albert sat on his walker just inside his Arctic entry with dog Wanda at his feet enjoying the sunny evening view. He said it’s scary to know the water is coming closer to his doorstep with every squall.

Albert, 60, has mobility challenges due to damage to his spine, caused by a fall from a cliff when he was a boy, he said. The damaged boardwalks complicate things. He’s looking forward to living in Mertarvik.

“You can walk anywhere,” he said.

Lisa Charles, 41, won’t miss the muddy walkways either. Moving will be a chance to declutter her family’s household. But anxiety tempers her excitement.

“Sometimes I want to cry and then other times I can’t wait to move,” she said.

Michael Fairbanks, 26, also expressed mixed feelings as he returned home from a hunt. He carried five dead muskrats by their tails as he walked toward the flood-prone north end of Newtok. It’s quiet on that end of town, he said.

“Honestly, I just don’t feel comfortable with it, because I don’t want to leave Newtok,” he said. “Newtok’s been my home for 25 years, and it’s just unbelievable that we’re moving.”

Fairbanks looked up from skinning a muskrat toward geese as they passed overhead, remarking that they’re probably getting fat for the winter. He understands that moving is necessary, he said, but he still has questions.

“What is there to hunt if I move over there? I keep asking my mom that every day,” Fairbanks said.

At the fuel tank, Louie Andy, 57, said he’s skeptical the new village is in the right location. He suspects Mertarvik will face more wind than Newtok, which will cause the snow to drift high. He’s concerned that the hilly roads might be difficult to walk when he’s an old man.

Andy might be the last resident to move from Newtok, he joked. Maybe someday he’ll look forward to it, he said. But not today.

“You can ask me the same question next year,” said Andy, a lifelong Newtok resident. “But this year, my mind is right here.”

Moving day

The Western Alaska sky was clear and the water calm last weekend. Construction progress was sufficient and barge traffic was clear in Mertarvik. The time had finally come for Newtok’s first six families to move.

Residents shuttled their belongings to the water’s edge with ATVs. Some carried them across the mud. Several reporters and filmmakers documented the historic hefting of boxes into aluminum boats at high tide. Filmmaker Andrew Burton and his colleagues had been waiting for this moment since they started work on a documentary film about Newtok 3 1/2 years ago.

“I think this is one of the most important stories going on in America right now,” Burton said. “I think the growing issue of people having to be moving across landscapes due to a changing climate is kind of at the forefront of what’s coming down the line.”

Two tidy rows of homes came into view as a boat approached the new village. The Fairbanks-based Cold Climate Housing Research Center designed the 13 Mertarvik homes that were built this year with an eye toward efficiency. Eight other houses had been completed in previous years. By freeze-up, about one-third of Newtok’s approximately 370 people are expected to move, Dixon said.

To decide who in Newtok moved to the new village first, the village council scored residents’ applications based on criteria it developed with help from Association of Village Council Presidents Regional Housing Authority, officials said. Newtok residents living in proximity to the eroding riverbank, in a flood zone or contending with black mold tended to receive priority.

“We looked at every single application, and if (village council members) were a relative of that household, you were excused from making that decision,” Cadiente said. “We understand the conflict of interest.”

That Saturday afternoon, as the moving boats arrived, Mertarvik was a flurry of activity. ATVs, lifts and construction workers darted purposefully along its two main roads. Chris Olds, construction manager for UIC Construction, described what has been done and what’s left to do as winter approaches.

“We now have a power plant here. We’re working on the water treatment plant now. The houses. We’re working on the Pioneer School and a clinic that will be finished up towards the end of the year,” Olds said.

For now, school is in session at a temporary building previously used for storage and dining. Mertarvik School, which people have been calling Pioneer School informally, had its first day on Oct. 14. Classes will soon move to the evacuation center until a permanent school is built.

Nearby, families checked out their new homes, climbing sturdy stairs and walking across decks with a view of the Ninglick River from safely above its waterline.

Sharon David held her 5-month-old outward as she strolled across the living room. Other children flitted from empty room to empty room. Sun shined through double-paned windows.

Later, Sharon's mother, Albertina Charles, joined her grandkids on the vinyl floor, holding a baby in her lap. Charles, who will be an associate teacher in Mertarvik as she was in Newtok, said leaving was emotional.

"If only there was no erosion, no flood, no permafrost melting, we would still be over there," she said.

"We'll get used to living here," she said. "For real, it's not going to be same living here."

Cadiente, the relocation coordinator, said filling the new homes meant those people were finally safe. That energizes him, he said, and it's a reason to plan "a fiddle and a feast." But planning for the next phase of construction would leave little time to rest.

"This erosion (and) this flooding is not going to slow down," Cadiente said. "We keep on going."

Reporter Greg Kim from KYUK Public Media contributed to this story.

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