SEASIDE HEIGHTS, N.J. — A string of artificial islands off the coast of New Jersey and New York could blunt the impact of storm surges that proved so deadly during Superstorm Sandy, according to a proposal vying for attention and funding as the region continues its recovery.

It’s a big proposal that would cost $10 billion to $12 billion. But it’s also the kind of innovative idea that federal officials requested as they consider how best to protect the heavily populated region from future storms.

“We’ve discussed this with the governor’s office of Recovery and Resiliency and the Department of Environmental Protection, and they all look at me like, ‘Whoa! This is a big deal!’ said Alan Blumberg, a professor at New Jersey’s Stevens Institute of Technology. “Yes, it is a big deal. It can save lives and protect property.”

The “Blue Dunes” proposal is part of Rebuild By Design, a competition sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Community Development. The contest asks architects, engineers and designers for creative solutions to help the region recover.

The winners are expected to be announced this spring. A $30 million grant from the federal government is required to fund the project.
After Sandy, feds mull plan for artificial islands - The Washington Post

Urban Development to come up with novel ways to protect against the next big storm. It is one of 10 projects that will be evaluated and voted on next week, but there’s no guarantee any of them will receive funding. Other ideas include building sea walls around cities, re-establishing oyster colonies in tidal flats to blunt wave action and creating water-absorbent nature and recreational preserves.

The artificial islands plan was created by Stevens Institute, along with the WXY architectural firm and West 8 Urban Design and Landscape Architecture. It is designed to blunt the worst effect of Sandy: the storm surge that pounded the coast. From Maryland to New Hampshire, the storm was blamed for 159 deaths, and New Jersey and New York alone claimed a total of nearly $79 billion in damage.

“How do you protect New Jersey and New York at the same time from the storm of the future?” Blumberg asked. “Our idea is to build a chain of islands, like a long slender banana. The wave action and storm surge will reflect off these islands and go back out to sea rather than hitting the coast. Barnegat Bay would not be pounded, nor would lower Manhattan or Hoboken.”

The islands 10 to 12 miles off the coast would be uninhabited, though day trips for surfing or fishing might be allowed, Blumberg said. They would be built by pumping sand atop some hard base made of rock, concrete or other material, he said.

Steve Sandberg, a spokesman for U.S. Sen. Robert Menendez, D-N.J., said funding for at least some of the proposals is already available as part of the $60 billion in Sandy aid that Congress passed last year. Other money could come from disaster recovery grants as well as public and private-sector funding, according to the Rebuild by Design website.

A gap would be left between the New York and New Jersey island groups, mainly to allow water from the Hudson River to flow out into the ocean.

Blumberg also said computer modeling has shown such islands would have produced vastly lesser damage during Sandy, Hurricane Donna in 1962 and the destructive December 1992 nor’easter.

Aside from the formidable cost, many other obstacles remain. Stewart Farrell, head of Stockton College’s Coastal Research Center, said numerous government agencies would have to cooperate.

“The sand borrow sites always run into strong objections from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service: ‘Something MIGHT live there,’” he said. “Next in line would be the historical preservationists: You can’t cover up Captain Kidd’s treasure ships, no way! And every 19th-century coal barge is an historical treasure. Then there are abundant submarine cables, lines, pipes and rights of way.”

Surfers aren’t stoked by the idea.

“This would forever change the Jersey shore,” said John Weber of the Surfrider Foundation. “Bayfronts are very different from oceanfronts, and this would change oceanfronts into bayfronts. People that spent all that money to live on the ocean would be facing something very different. And this does nothing to address rising sea levels; we’ll still have homes that will still get flooded due to rising sea levels.”

George Kasimos founded the Stop Fema Now grassroots campaign against higher flood
insurance rates after his Toms River home was flooded during Sandy. He welcomed the attention on coastal prevention but said the money would be better spent on building or strengthening dunes along the existing shoreline.

“Anything to help protect our coast,” he said. “All we need to do is build a proper dunes system, sea gates and sea walls. It seems like $10 billion to build something 12 miles out is overkill. Typical government overkill.”

Blumberg acknowledged the obstacles but added that Sandy showed the need for new approaches to protection.

“This is innovative thinking,” he said. “It’s 2014; it’s time to think differently.”

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Part of a periodic series about the New Jersey shore's efforts to rebuild and return to normalcy the second summer after Superstorm Sandy ravaged many coastal communities.

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