

Rising to the sea's challenge

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To its everlasting credit, the state Division of Coastal Management (DCM) is trying to institute new development policies along our shoreline that recognize sea level rise. It is a splendid display of bureaucratic courage and foresight.

The basic concept is that new development be located so it will not be impacted by a 3-foot sea level rise. A 3-foot rise is based on projections from a panel of North Carolina scientists and is the minimal expected rise by the year 2100.

To its everlasting discredit, the Carteret County Board of Commissioners is trying to enlist other coastal counties as allies in a battle to stop this proposed policy from happening. In this effort it may be succeeding; the Beaufort County commission has voted unanimously against the proposed policy.

Rather than accepting - and dealing with - the inevitable impacts of global climate change, Carteret County has decided to ignore the facts, hide its head in the sand and hope that sea level rise will simply go away. Nothing could be more irresponsible.

County commissioners argue, for example, that a 3-foot rise is not well-founded and that DCM has given little thought to how proposed policy that addresses sea level rise will impact local economies. I would argue to the contrary.

Science panels from just about every other coastal state have come up with the same number, and some (e.g., Miami/Dade County, Fla.) project a likely rise as high as 5 feet. And the fact that DCM is even trying to mitigate future impacts of sea level rise on development indicates it is giving thought to the local economy.

The longer our coastal zone is developed with blinders on, and the longer coastal development is governed by greed, the greater the economic burden we are putting on our children and grandchildren.

Despite a smattering of regulations, we have thousands of buildings - some of them high rises, many of them investment and rental properties - jammed up against an eroding beach along most of our state's 120 miles of developed shoreline. Efforts to hold eroding shorelines in place by beach nourishment have proven expensive, with most of the cost borne by people who live nowhere near the beach. Past attempts by DCM to strictly enforce existing regulations (e.g., removal of sandbags) have been less than impressive.

The hazardous nature of some of our coastal development is already breathtaking. For example, I believe that North Topsail Beach, lined by condos and largely less than 5 feet above sea level, is the most hazardous development on the East Coast. For North Topsail Beach (as well as South Nags Head and Ocean Isle Beach)

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and much of the Florida coast, it may be too late to do anything but build massive and costly seawalls.

Erosion problems in North Topsail Beach, however, will pale in comparison to the problems Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Miami, among others, will face. In 40 or 50 years, coastal cities will require huge sums of money to build walls, tidal gates (like Venice plans to do) and move buildings in response to sea level rise.

Will there be enough taxpayer money available to protect a few vacation homes when the nation's coastal cities are in trouble? Is there now?

So why are we spending large sums to protect people who were imprudent enough to invest in property next to an eroding shoreline when the cost of doing so will only continue to go up and up?

The time has come to recognize the very real threat that sea level rise poses to our coast and to act responsibly in a way that benefits current and future generations. Coastal counties or municipalities that follow Carteret County's lead are setting up their residents and businesses to fail.

All North Carolinians - especially those along the coast - should support, with enthusiasm and pride, these new forward-looking policies being developed by our Division of Coastal Management.

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