

Will we heed warnings from recent floods?



**SKIP
STILES**

FLOODING FROM last week's Veterans Day nor'easter is a stark reminder of the risks we face living near the coast. It should also be a warning of what we can expect from accelerated rates of sea level rise.

In my grandchildren's lifetime, our region will regularly experience those types of floods. Last month at Old Dominion University, two world-class scientists came to talk about their polar research work. They estimate we will see at least a meter of sea level rise over the next 100 years — two meters if we don't control greenhouse gas emissions.

One meter of sea level rise, with the spring tides of a full or new moon, will produce minimum flooding nearly 5 feet above today's sea level, close to last week's inundation.

With bimonthly flooding of 5 feet and occasional flooding of 10 feet, the viability of Hampton Roads is endangered, unless we begin to

Hampton Roads could face large financial losses and disaster-related expenses, constrained economic opportunity and an uncertain future from sea level rise.

prepare today. The recently released ODU "State of the Region" report had a chapter on climate change and made the same point: Unless we begin to plan and prepare, Hampton Roads faces large financial losses and disaster-related expenses, constrained economic opportunity and an uncertain future.

Naval Station Norfolk and other coastal bases are planning for sea level rise and making changes. Northrop Grumman Shipbuilding is warily eyeing our rising seas. Every smart corporation, utility or local government in the region is doing the same. Trouble is, they aren't getting

much help.

In the report of the Virginia Commission on Climate Change, we made a number of recommendations to prepare Virginia for future impacts. Nearly a year later, few of those measures have been acted upon.

In June, I testified to Congress that Virginia's inaction left us to stumble blind and alone across an increasingly dangerous landscape. With the Veterans Day nor'easter, we can glimpse the danger of this inaction and perhaps gain motivation to start preparing.

Improved coastal maps, better flood predictions, more tide

gauges and buoys and a host of other efforts can help us prepare for today's weather disasters and lessen the cost of tomorrow's climate impacts.

With last week's storm leaving debris on our lawns, we all got a chance to glimpse the future. How close did the tides come to our house, business, school, hospital or fire station? Even if the buildings were high and dry, which roads leading to them went under water? How did public transportation work? How will planned improvements, like our new light rail line, perform under these conditions?

The first step in answering these questions is to ask the state to provide us with high resolution maps, like those in North Carolina and Maryland, so we can figure out which areas will get wet and how fast.

Next, the state needs to give us the elevations on critical transportation segments and other facilities, so we know

what's at risk. Utilities and residences need to be put on these digital maps as well.

Then we can start making strategic decisions about how to keep our communities functioning through the next storm and the one that follows, as the tides begin to creep landward. Local governments can start including these impacts into their long-range land use and hazard mitigation plans. New buildings and roads can be kept out of areas where they will regularly flood, saving taxpayer dollars.

Last week's storm gave us a valuable lesson on coastal flooding and sea level rise. The storms to come will test how much we have learned.

Skip Stiles is executive director of Wetlands Watch, a statewide environmental organization based in Norfolk. He was a member of the Virginia Commission on Climate Change. E-mail him at skip.stiles@wetlandswatch.org.