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# OTHER OPINIONS

## The inconvenient truth of 2006

In 2005, violent storms and the flooding of New Orleans were cited as warnings of global climate change. In 2006, the danger signs showed up here.

Three of the nine highest storm tides of the last 70 years occurred in 2006: Ernesto in September, the Columbus Day nor'easter and the Thanksgiving nor'easter.

In October, State Farm stopped selling insurance on businesses within a half-mile of the Oceanfront. In December, Allstate announced it would stop selling new policies for homeowners insurance in Hampton Roads.

What were the effects of this? A Carova couple were unable to sell their \$2 million house once flood maps were redrawn to reflect sea level rise, making their Outer Banks house uninsurable.

Sea-level rise is one of the major impacts of global climate change, and conservative estimates have the relative sea level going up two feet in Hampton Roads by 2100.

Other researchers at the University of Maryland predict higher waters, saying we could see a one-foot rise in 25 years and three feet by 2100.

Some scientists are revising estimates even higher; they talk about sea level increases in our region that would make the nor'easter storm surge-tide line on Columbus Day our permanent shoreline.

In addition, federal government studies are predicting a loss of most, if not all, of the Oceanfront beach at Virginia Beach. For every foot of sea level rise, 100 feet or more of beach in this part of the country gets sucked away.

Take away 200 feet of Virginia Beach's sand and there is little left to attract tourists. When a storm surge reaches the Boardwalk bulkhead, the rest of the beach will be gone permanently, as waves will scour away the bottom.

In Sandbridge, Carova, Corolla, Duck, Southern Shores and points south, oceanfront houses will fall into the sea.

Think about tunnel entrances flooded on a regular basis. Imagine spending \$1,000 a year to protect waterfront lots, as a recent federal study predicted. Then imagine spending many billions of dollars to prevent wholesale loss of our landscape.

This is not some Al Gore-inspired, doom-and-gloom fantasy. Go to Larchmont in Norfolk where houses today are being raised off their foundations 8 feet — at taxpayer expense — to prevent repeated flooding.

Talk to that couple in Carova who cannot sell their house.

Try to get flood insurance on a home or business at the Oceanfront.

Outside of New Orleans, Hampton Roads is the largest population area at greatest risk from sea-level rise. Unlike New Orleans, few in state or local government are looking seriously at this issue.

Maryland and North Carolina have both conducted studies on sea-level rise and its impact. In contrast, no comprehensive studies have been done in Virginia. The cities in the Hampton Roads region, as well as our planning district, have struck an ostrich-like posture on the largest long-term threat to our region's prosperity, even our survival.

Most major studies on sea level rise point to land-use changes as the key. They cite the need to start moving away from the shoreline by changing zoning and enforcing building restrictions.

Most of the localities here are doing just the opposite. In fact, Norfolk is allowing the worst shoreline crowding in Virginia, having exempted itself from the Virginia requirement for a 100-foot shoreline buffer area.

Shoreline development has larger consequences. Sea-level rise means the loss of almost all of our region's remaining tidal wetlands; shoreline development blocks the "retreat" of wetlands as sea level rises. Without these wetlands, the Chesapeake Bay and its coastal tributaries will further collapse, unable to support much life.

We need to begin an intensive regional investigation of the impacts of sea-level rise and put together a strategy of infrastructure investment and land-use changes. Without this work, we will become an island, both physically and economically cut off from the rest of Virginia.

And, if we don't start soon, we'll have no sand left to stick our head in.

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