

Katrina, Ophelia and Rita have come and gone. Katrina left total devastation in its wake along the Mississippi and Alabama shoreline. The first few rows of the city of Waveland, MS for example, have been totally destroyed for the second time in 35 years. Similar damage occurred along the entire MS coast. On Dauphin Island, AL extensive damage occurred for the fourth time since 1979 when Hurricane Frederick raked over the island. In fact, the amount of damage to Dauphin Island, which was only on the margins of Katrina, may have been overestimated because damage from Hurricane Ivan (2004) was not entirely cleaned-up. At the moment of this writing it appears that Rita will flatten most of the beachfront buildings along Galveston Island.

Ophelia didn't leave any sort of spectacular building damage like Katrina, except for a few areas on the backside of islands, such as in Salter Path on Bogue Banks. But it is already clear that a number of local communities are going to claim loss of replenished beaches in the hope that the federal government will replace them. This will cost many millions of dollars, and if past patterns prevail, property owners who line the beach will pay very little of it.

Living next to the beach may afford a beautiful view of the sea, but between the annual erosion problem, which goes on whether we have storms or not, and the storm problem, this is the most obviously dangerous construction site on the globe. Sure, earthquakes are tough to live with, too. But no natural hazard has the absolute certainty of occurring as oceanic storms and shoreline erosion.

And, because of the federal government's role in storm recovery, beach nourishment, flood insurance, construction and reconstruction of bridges and roads and other infrastructure on islands, the cost of beachfront development is through the roof. Excluding the catastrophe in New Orleans, much of this cost is directed at the first three or four rows of buildings along the beachfront.

Beachfront buildings are not only damaged or destroyed at a much higher rate than property further away from the beach, but the vast majority are financial investments, not someone's home. Does the federal government have an obligation to step in and reward someone who chooses to own a multimillion-dollar investment property next to an eroding or storm-prone beach?

Hurricane Katrina, Rita and, to a lesser extent the numerous other hurricanes that have struck in the past year, provide an unparalleled opportunity to take a fresh look at the nation's policy of beachfront development. Even so, groups such as the American Shore and Beach Preservation Association (ASBPA) are using the recent spate of hurricanes to lobby for additional federal spending on beach nourishment. But a billion dollar beach would not have saved the Mississippi coast, and the intent of the ASBPA seems only to be saving the cash cow rental properties of beachfront property owners.

Harry Simmons, ASBPA President, may argue that beach nourishment will save property and lives. But in fact, nourishment increases the number of lives and amount of property

at risk because the density of development always increases behind a nourished beach as cottages morph into high rises.

Nourishment also results in bad quality beaches, as we saw in Oak Island (rocks), Pine Knoll Shores and Emerald Isle (shell gravel) and Atlantic Beach (mud). It seems that those concerned with protecting property could care less about protecting the quality of beaches for future generations, adding insult to injury as far as the public is concerned.

The time has come to recognize the wisdom of stepping back from the shoreline. To do otherwise will invite evermore, and ever more severe, disasters as sea level continues to rise and as storm intensity and frequency continue to increase. This can be done in several ways:

- We can prohibit reconstruction after a building is destroyed or severely damaged
- We can take federal and state support away from beachfront property owners
- We can purchase threatened buildings or let them fall in
- We can move threatened buildings out of harms way
- We can build dunes to replace property that has been removed from the beachfront

Anyway you cut it; we are heading for many more disasters in the future, unless we begin to apply common sense to beachfront development.

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