

Ike renews debate over coastal development

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Sept. 22, 2008, 11:08AM

There is no community of Gilchrist, at least for now. The Bolivar Peninsula hamlet exists only on maps after the storm surge of Hurricane Ike all but erased it. Beachside cottages on stilts are gone, the roads impassable.

Similarly, the hurricane devastated other spots along the Texas coast, places like Crystal Beach and Surfside Beach, paradises lost.

The impulse to rebuild will surely follow, but Ike's surge has infused the coastal development debate that has been a staple of the state's political rhetoric for decades.

Already, one week after the hurricane, some scientists, lawmakers and property owners have wondered whether an area that will likely be ravaged again is worth fixing and further developing.

"We have to protect people from themselves and certainly from developers," said Jim Blackburn, an environmental attorney and coastal expert based in Houston. "Anyone who wants to buy on the West End of Galveston Island should be shown a picture of the Bolivar Peninsula after Ike."

The reality is, the coastline is changing, and changing fast, geologists say.

While trophy houses, subdivisions and hotels have sprouted along the Gulf of Mexico, rising seas and sinking land have led to the rapid erosion of the state's shoreline. By some estimates, as much as 10 feet of beachfront washes away each year.

Hurricanes cause even more damage to fragile barrier lands, such as Galveston and the Bolivar Peninsula, by raking even more sand into back-shore bays and hindering the natural accumulation of sediment on the ocean side.

As the sandy shore shifts over decades, a barrier island may look the same, but it will be farther landward. Houses that once stood hundreds of feet from the surf will be encroaching on the Gulf.

Restrictions sought

Until recently, Texas has done little to address the erosion problem along its 367 miles of mostly wild shoreline. In April, Jerry Patterson, the state's land commissioner, proposed new restrictions on coastline construction.

The state's Open Beaches Act already prohibits houses seaward of the vegetation line, which crawls steadily landward as the beaches erode.

Patterson is asking local governments in coastal counties to adopt regulations that call for new buildings to be set back 60 times the erosion rate, as measured from the beach's vegetation line. Under the rules, if the shoreline is eroding 6 feet each year, then construction wouldn't be allowed within 360 feet.

The loudest protests have come from Galveston Island and the Bolivar Peninsula.

Property owners and public officials have called the proposed rules a land grab by the state that would adversely affect local economies.

Galveston County, in particular, has seen booming growth of late, especially along the island's fashionable but low-lying West End, just beyond the reach of the protective Seawall.

The county's population is projected to reach nearly 300,000 people by 2030, up from about 200,000 in 1980.

Patterson, who oversees the Texas coastline, said his intent is not to trample on property rights, but to confront what he considers a crucial problem. In addition to the eroding shoreline, he is concerned that the high cost of rebuilding highways and pipelines and restoring beaches on barrier lands will become a perpetual burden on state taxpayers.

"Everyone is in the mode of rebuilding and recovery, but there are limits," he said after flying over the area last week. "There are a lot of places where we build close to the coast, and it might be time to rethink it."

Karen Mahoney, the Galveston City Council member who represents the West End, acknowledged that the city should take another look at setbacks after Ike washed away homes three rows from the beach. But it's too early to say how, or if, the regulations will change, she said.

"I'm sure we'll be able to look at the damage and the data and see what works and what doesn't work," Mahoney said, adding that buildings constructed under the city's most recent codes fared well in the storm.

Fiscal responsibility

Amid the push to rethink the coast, there is pull to replace what's lost.

"The West End will rebuild," Jerry Mohn, president of the West Galveston Island Property Owners' Association, wrote in an e-mail. "It's always been a paradise and will remain one."

After an aerial survey of the devastated coastline, Gov. Rick Perry said it would be up to property owners to decide whether they want to rebuild.

"We live in a free society, and I fall down on the side of freedom," he said. "The vast majority of time, Southeast Texas is a great place to live."

But some coastal experts said people shouldn't be allowed to rebuild before policymakers take steps to make the coast safer.

Rob Young, a geologist at Western Carolina University who has been studying coastal storms since 1989, said he doesn't advocate wholesale retreat from the Gulf, but wants lawmakers to reconsider subsidies for rebuilding in certain areas.

With the federal government's guaranteed financial relief following disasters, beachfront landowners can rebuild what are more often investment properties — second and third homes and rentals — while taxpayers assume the risk, he said. The thinking is, if the federal help goes away, so would development.

Young and other researchers point to Alabama's Dauphin Island as an example of unwise coastal development. The 15-mile strip of sand with 1,300 residents has taken eight hits from hurricanes since 1979 and has received more than \$80 million in federal subsidies for recovery efforts.

"It's fiscally irresponsible to put everything back the way it was," Young said.

Lawmakers on the spot

Orrin Pilkey, a Duke University geologist and one of the world's foremost researchers of barrier islands, said Texas' proposed setbacks are a start, but they "simply put the problem off to the next generation."

The state and local governments, Pilkey said, should plan for at least 7 feet of sea-level rise over the next century before rebuilding and developing on barrier islands, a move that would provide more protection from storm surges. What's more, high-rise hotels and condos should be built on the back side of the island, because they can't be moved like cottages as the coast vanishes.

"It's not time to build up, but to move back or get off," he said. "If we can't do this, we will go back to where we are."

Pilkey said he doesn't expect lawmakers to bring about any changes along the coast, considering the absence of new laws after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in

2005. Texas, for one, didn't place new restrictions on beachfront development in 1983 after Hurricane Alicia, which followed a similar path as Ike.

"I don't know where Texas will get the guts to do this, because no one else has," he said.

But state Rep. Warren Chisum, a Pampa Republican who chairs the House Appropriations Committee, said he expects robust talks among his colleagues about how much and where to invest along the coast this time.

"Maybe some of the houses are too close to the coast, and maybe we've been too complacent since the last hurricane," Chisum said. "We've learned that you can't outguess Mother Nature, and she could be back next year. So we need to be smarter before we deal with her again."

Chronicle reporter Clay Robison contributed to this report.