

Our Katrina cometh

... and N.C. eases coastal development rules, ignoring the painful lessons of other states

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CULLOWHEE - When I flew over the Mississippi coast four days after Hurricane Katrina, I was shocked by the totality of the damage. Block after block of buildings had been wiped clean, their existence marked only by splintered pilings and bare concrete pads. After the flight, I remember wondering whether I'd ever see such complete devastation again.

Less than three years later, as I flew over the Texas coast, I got my answer.

The damage inflicted upon the Bolivar Peninsula by Hurricane Ike, while not as widespread as Katrina's, was every bit as complete. Virtually every front-row structure is gone, and where vacation and rental homes once stood six, seven or more rows deep, only pilings and concrete pads now remain.

What Katrina had done to Mississippi, Ike did to Texas.

As we cleared Galveston and headed back to Houston, I didn't wonder whether I'd see such devastation again, but when. How long, I thought, until I'm making this flight over North Carolina?

Unfortunately, as long as money and politics continue to trump science and common sense along our coast, the answer is sooner than later.

With Ike's damages estimated to exceed \$30 billion, and with images of Katrina still burned deeply into our collective conscience, the N.C. Coastal Resources Commission has inexplicably voted to gut coastal development rules and allow houses to be built closer to the ocean.

I guess nobody on the CRC ever climbed into a single-engine plane and looked down at what a Category 2 storm can do to houses built on a narrow, low-lying, dynamic pile of sand.

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IT'S ONE THING TO FLY AND DOCUMENT STORM DAMAGE. IT'S QUITE ANOTHER TO WORK TO PREVENT, OR AT LEAST REDUCE, IT. And that's what we in Western Carolina University's Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines have been trying to do for over 20 years.

But it isn't easy. It isn't easy when the CRC and state Division of Coastal Management -- each charged with protecting our state's coastal resources -- continually cave into development interests, as they did again recently.

They justify their decisions by saying that development can only move farther seaward behind engineered beaches that have been artificially stabilized by beach nourishment.

But if there's one thing Katrina and Ike should have taught us, it's the futility of trying to stabilize beaches through beach nourishment, or any type of coastal engineering. The devastated Mississippi coast was "protected" by beach nourishment and seawalls. The Bolivar Peninsula -- where almost every structure was destroyed or substantially damaged -- was "protected" by massive sandbag seawalls.

At a time of rising sea level, and with the possibility of stronger and more frequent hurricanes, the last thing we need is a de facto state policy that encourages shoreline stabilization and irresponsible development.

Besides, with the National Flood Insurance Program -- \$20 billion in debt before Ike -- teetering on insolvency, the economy sinking and public indignation rising over the use of tax money to protect someone else's risky investment, who's going to pay for all this beach nourishment (not to mention the billions of dollars of storm damage that will happen, with or without, nourishment)?

North Carolina deserves better. We deserve coastal managers who are willing and able to learn from the mistakes of others, who understand it doesn't take a Katrina or Ike to create significant problems, who recognize the harm of coastal engineering and who are willing to ask tough questions.

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WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO PUT US BACK ON THE PATH TO RESPONSIBLE COASTAL MANAGEMENT? For starters, Division of Coastal Management and the CRC should:

- * Base coastal management policies on science and facts, not conjecture,
- * Develop and implement a viable coastal retreat policy that removes vulnerable development in a proactive and equitable manner, and
- * Ask critical questions, such as should we rebuild, where and who will pay, now -- before we need to know the answers.

How long until we get our Katrina is anyone's guess. But it will happen. And when it does, we'll be here, working to help improve the management of North Carolina's developed shorelines, just as we have since 1986.

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