

State should plan for rising sea levels

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As the new General Assembly convenes, all the focus is on where the state can save money to fill holes in a \$3 billion-plus budget gap.

One place legislators can look to is North Carolina's coast. It's an area where tax dollars spent unwisely literally face the prospect of floating out to sea.

The Coastal Resource Commission's science panel last year pointed to estimates that sea levels will rise between 15 and 55 inches by the year 2100, with a midrange estimate of 1 meter, or 39 inches.

Some 2,000 square miles of North Carolina coast are currently 1 meter or less above sea level. By way of comparison, Buncombe County is about 656 square miles in size. So, the equivalent of about three Buncombe counties appear to be headed for, if not Davy Jones' locker, at least his wading pool.

As such, the state Division of Coastal Management is considering drafts of what will hopefully become the first comprehensive policy regarding sea rise for North Carolina. It would help govern development and the building of public structures like roads and bridges.

Such moves are already happening to a degree. The 28-mile widening of U.S. 64 saw state engineers raise the roadbed a foot to cope with the anticipated rise in coastal waters.

Engineer Ted Devens told The Charlotte Observer, "What we're trying to do is get away from the hype and just look at the data. Our data tells us sea level is rising."

Rob Young, director of the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines at Western Carolina University, along with his mentor, Orrin Pilkey, the James B. Duke Professor Emeritus in the Duke University Division of Earth and Ocean Science, penned the acclaimed book "The Rising Sea," which came out in hardback in 2009. (It's now hitting bookstores in paperback). Young says the initial moves the state is taking in the long run are wise, but an examination of current practices also is needed.

For example, currently areas savaged by storms are typically rebuilt using taxpayer-subsidized federal flood insurance.

With more than 30,000 homes and other buildings in the recently identified risk zone, that could sink a lot of money into potentially fruitless efforts. And a widespread sea rise would also see North Carolina standing at the back of the priority line. Young said, "If we have to fix Manhattan, Hatteras is not going to compete for money real well."

Young also notes this isn't planning for some future event; sea levels are already on the rise. "Sea-level rise is happening now. This is not a projection of something that will happen in the future if climate continues to change."

As the waters rise, infrastructure like water and sewer lines will need to be moved inland. The time to plan for such moves is now, before roads and industries are inundated.

Dornan said, "Do you move those things now, or do you wait? It gets to be an interesting chicken-and-egg question."

Answering that question deserves serious scrutiny from state leaders.

It's likely to be an expensive answer. We needn't make it costlier than it has to be by brushing the question off until it's too late.