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BODY:

At the moment of this writing, Hurricane Isabel is fast approaching the mainland of North America and is almost certainly going to strike the coast. The potential for destruction is huge, although thanks to ever -improving emergency management, loss of life will hopefully be minimized.

I used to hear the phrase among some concerned citizens; "what we need is a good hurricane..." The assumption was that once a hurricane had struck hard we would come to our senses and change our destructive pattern of coastal barrier development. Surely it would be obvious that it makes no sense to pile up ever larger buildings next to an eroding shoreline that is subject to the mightiest storms on the globe.

Unfortunately, since Hurricanes Hugo (1989) in South Carolina and Fran (1996) in North Carolina, this hope for a turn around on coastal development has been dashed on the rocks of greed and irresponsibility. If the experiences with Hugo and Fran hold any lessons for us, it is that Hurricane Isabel will likely be an urban renewal project, wherever it hits.

After Hurricane Hugo, ravished buildings on the beachfronts of Garden City and Folly Beach were replaced with larger and more expensive buildings. This in spite of the fact that the building lots were now more dangerous than before. The dunes had been lowered or removed and the shorelines had eroded back. The same thing happened in North Carolina, the best example being Topsail Island. On North Topsail, which because of its narrowness and low elevation is arguably the most dangerous island community for development on the East Coast, houses were actually rebuilt on the sites of inlets formed in Fran,- inlets that will certainly open again someday.

Why has it come to this, a storm response that can only be described as a form of societal madness? The problem is that we encourage it. Both federal and state governments rush in to put infrastructure back just the way it was after the storm passes.

At great monetary cost to taxpayers, the US Army Corps of Engineers continues to nourish beaches up and down the East Coast, an action that clearly increases the density of development and puts more buildings and people in harm's way. Nourishment also puts off the common sense approach of moving buildings back (while they are still small). Locally, beach nourishment has significantly degraded the recreational value of some beaches. The Corps' own study of the Outer Banks indicates that purchase of beach front property is a cheaper way than nourishment to "solve" the erosion problem. Beach nourishment is a costly band aid solution which, in a time of rising sea level, will inevitably lead to seawalls which in turn will destroy the beaches belonging to us all.

There are a number of pro-beach-development organizations such as the North Carolina Shore and Beach Preservation Association that downplay the hazards of barrier island living. They argue that it is up to all of us to fund the building of new beaches to save the houses of those who live next to the beach. This is done under the guise of saving the beach but if there were no buildings crowding the shore, the beaches would be wide and healthy..

The coming storm will be declared a tragic act of God - a natural disaster (which indeed it will be for inland locations). Hubris will reign. American flags will appear everywhere along the beach and "we're tough and coming back" will be the prevailing attitude. But the storm can better be characterized as a stupid act of humans -putting their building so obviously in harms way. Nothing natural about this disaster. Why do we owe them a bailout?

Why not cool it? Why replace destroyed buildings in a zone so susceptible to damage in future storms? After Fran, some North Carolina politicians, ever so briefly, considered prohibiting just that. Why rebuild along a shoreline creeping ever closer to the buildings? Why continue nourishing beaches when it only creates more and bigger buildings in harm's way? Why not apply common sense and foresight to this burgeoning beachfront burden to our society?

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