

Submerged - Sea-level rise demands new plans, action

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The rising tide will indeed lift all boats. But don't expect it to lift roads, bridges, parking lots, launching ramps and billions of dollars in real estate lining North Carolina's shoreline.

We're talking about a tide that probably won't ebb for decades, maybe centuries.

This isn't a tide at all, of course. It's the rise of sea levels that is slowly but steadily advancing on our lowland coast. According to a Charlotte Observer story Sunday, a state science panel is predicting a sea-level rise of one meter (about 39 inches) by the end of this century.

That is no problem for living residents. But if we don't act now, we bequeath a terrifying problem to our grandchildren.

Nor is this a what-if phenomenon. "Sea-level rise is happening now," Western North Carolina University geologist Rob Young says. Young is studying the state's developed shorelines and says, "This is not a projection of something that will happen in the future if climate continues to change." Glaciers and ice caps already have melted; sea levels are rising around the world, sometimes with already-devastating effect.

That's why historic Cape Hatteras Lighthouse was moved in 1999. That secured the lighthouse for at least a few more decades, because sea levels already had risen by eight inches.

What does a 1-meter additional rise in sea level mean? State planners say it could threaten 2,000 square miles of North Carolina's coast. That land is home to some of the state's most expensive real estate, in today's market worth about \$7 billion.

It also would threaten state-owned recreational resources, including public beaches, boat-launching ramps, fishing piers, parks and three state aquariums. And then there are the roads that follow the coastline, and not just Highway 12 along the Outer Banks which, after a 1-meter ocean rise, could be under water at normal high tides.

This points to an urgent need for more detailed planning and changes in public policy. Planners are rethinking locations for roads, sewer and water systems. The last time U.S. Route 64 was widened across the Albemarle-Pamlico Peninsula, it also was raised by a foot because of rising seas.

That's a good step but more is in order, beginning with prohibition of building in more low-lying areas, and especially a ban on rebuilding in those areas after a hurricane cleans them off.

Argue all you want about climate change, the fact is, the sea is rising now. Planning and action are in order.