

Hurricane history isn't worth repeating

In the mid-1960s, my engineer father was assigned to the Saturn space rocket test site near Waveland, Miss. My parents loved the weather, the beaches and the people.

But the tranquility of small town life came to a crashing end in 1969 when Hurricane Camille paid a visit. My parents' house was flooded, and falling trees punctured the roof. Their plight, however, was nothing compared with those in the first two blocks next to the beach, where essentially every building was destroyed.

Waveland was eventually rebuilt, my parents have both since passed on and the impact of Camille has become a faded memory — until the morning of Aug. 29, 2005, when Hurricane Katrina's eye passed right over Waveland. This time, the total destruction extended five or six blocks back from the beach.

I recently visited a cousin whose house is not far from the concrete pad that marks the former site of my parents' house. I was impressed by the large number of volunteers still helping in the recovery effort — eight months later. Many were from church groups, as evidenced by buses emblazoned with various Baptist or Catholic church names.

Also in the mix were Mennonites — a row of ladies with long dresses and bonnets raking up debris — and college students who bypassed Cancun or Panama City to spend spring break in Waveland.

Still, I couldn't help but notice a number of distressing scenes, such as the proliferation of "For Sale" signs posted along the beach road. Some listed the price — one lot was selling for \$685,000 and another for \$700,000. Each lot featured nothing but a stark, white concrete pad, surrounded by nothing but empty concrete pads for as far as the eye could see.

At the west end of Waveland was a new billboard, nestled among twisted I-beams and fragments of a destroyed pier, advertising a soon-to-be-built four-tower, 36-story beachfront condominium. It will be the first high-rise in Waveland and will dramatically increase the town's population.

One problem with the condo is that everyone must escape the next hurricane down a two-lane beachfront road. The incongruity between volunteers helping the people of Waveland and developers seeking to profit from reconstruction in an obviously dangerous zone couldn't be greater.

An illustration of the town's vulnerability came about a month ago, when a small storm from the south flooded parts of Waveland and portions of the beachfront road.

There's no question that whatever gets rebuilt will again be destroyed. The only question is when. Waveland is adjacent to a broad flat continental shelf responsible for past storm surges in excess of 20 feet. The sorrowful end point is that Katrina likely will become nothing more than an urban renewal project, just as Camille was 36 years earlier.

If the complete destruction of six blocks next to the shore doesn't precipitate changes in coastal development, I'm afraid nothing will. Improving building codes or nourishing the beach won't work because rebuilding a community to withstand a future Category 4 or 5 hurricane with a 20-plus foot surge is an economic impossibility.

Today, the new hurricane season begins, in a time of rising sea levels and increasing intensity of storms. It makes no sense to simply rebuild and even increase building density after Katrina. It might be difficult to accept, but reconstruction near the beach should be prohibited. Strong consideration should also be given to halting future federal storm bailouts, including taxpayer-supported flood insurance and the handout of post-storm cleanup and reconstruction funds — all of which only encourages rebuilding in the most dangerous locations. Government purchase of vulnerable beach properties, as costly as it might be, would pay off in the long term.

Will we ever learn? Near the remains of City Hall is a still-standing historic sign thanking the volunteers who helped Waveland recover from Camille in 1969.

Perhaps Waveland should construct a new sign thanking the volunteer workers who came down after Camille and Katrina, but leave additional space to thank those who come after the next "big one."