Ready for next time?
Rethinking the shore after Sandy

At the regional, state, community and individual levels, our economic and emotional investment in the Shore is huge. But the evidence of Irene and Sandy suggests that storms of hurricane force will hit the Shore again, threatening major damage and loss of life. Views diverge on what changes in Shore development patterns and habits need to happen to respond to this threat.

The overall challenge

Recent storms teach that all our investments in the Shore are at serious risk. To avoid catastrophes more costly than Sandy in the near future, we must begin strategically to reduce the human footprint at the ocean’s edge. In other words, move housing, commerce and entertainment steadily inland through a planned retreat that will be the work of a generation. Obviously, the impact on property rights and individual livelihoods must be gauged and compensated. But narrow slivers of sand were never meant to be built upon as thickly as we do. They’re called barrier islands for a reason, and by mistreating them (and ignoring the ocean’s power) we put inland investments at risk. They are also places of great beauty, peacefulness and ecodiversity that deserve to be restored and protected. That should become our generational goal.

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Proponents tend to favor these actions

- Make the evidence about future sea-level rise the foundation for future development policy at the Shore.
- Declare barrier islands and other fragile oceanfront zones off-limits for rebuilding and redevelopment.
- Float a state bond issue to create a state fund, on the model of the farmland preservation program, to buy up properties on the shoreline and put them off-limits for development.
- Use master planning, tax policy and incentives to shift entertainment and retail centers inland.
- Aim to restore barrier islands as nature preserves and public recreational parks by the middle of the century.
- Concentrate any new Shore development in those few areas deemed to represent such economic value they cannot be abandoned.
- Eliminate federal flood insurance for areas that the master plan deems high-risk for development.
- Create an enforceable policy for protecting Shore ecosystems and species.

Arguments for this approach

- Let’s take the necessary steps while time remains for them to be useful.
- Climate change is real; sea-level rise will only increase. Their consequences will be major. They render the status quo unsustainable.
- Sometimes resiliency comes down to knowing when and how to retreat, to make a new stand in a new place.
- Barrier islands and shorelines were never meant to sustain the kind of heavy development we’ve stuck on them since the middle of last century.
- Poor, self-interested decisions by property owners on barrier islands have harmed mainland communities.
- Shore communities can no longer expect taxpayers around the state and nation to insulate them from the consequences of risky, unwise choices.
- Dune replenishment to protect the oceanfront castles of the affluent is a costly losing battle.
- Sandy showed how overdevelopment damages ecosystems and species.

Arguments against this approach

- The dangers of climate change and sea-level rise are hyped.
- People have always been drawn to live by the sand and the sea, and always will be. You can’t legislate against such a deep human desire.
- This is the truly elitist vision, where no one gets to truly enjoy the Shore except bird-watchers.
- This approach would be an unconstitutional attack on property rights.
- There is no political will, none, in either Trenton or Washington to provide legal and financial support for such a policy of “planned retreat.”
- This radical environmentalist viewpoint has no respect for the way Shore living is interwoven into the narratives of hundreds of thousands of families.
- Tourism is a linchpin of the state economy. This approach is a prescription for high unemployment and lower state revenues.
REBUILD AND PREPARE

Given our investment in the Shore, including its role in the traditions, dreams and lifestyles of millions of people, it’s unthinkable not to rebuild what was lost or damaged. We should focus on repairing damage, rebuilding homes and businesses, and reviving the Shore economy as quickly as possible. Individual homeowners and businesses who suffered losses deserve help, with little red tape. The storms of the last two years were probably outliers, so it’s important to respond, but not overreact. The storms did point out some serious flaws in preparedness and emergency communications. These should be fixed before the next storm hits; social media and technology can be big helps here.

PROPONENTS TEND TO FAVOR THESE ACTIONS

- Give ample, swift government aid to help homeowners rebuild.
- Give ample, swift government aid to help businesses and business districts reopen.
- Replenish beaches as quickly as possible to restore tourism, property values and people’s spirits.
- Rebuild dunes to provide more effective flood protection.
- Give municipalities the lead role in redeveloping their communities, including clear legal authority to green light development on piers.
- Help municipalities create better emergency plans, including use of social media for real-time communication during emergencies.
- Establish clearer, firmer rules regarding evacuation, and do better public communication in advance about evacuation routes, shelters etc.
- Limit “no-build” flood zones to a very few clear-cut cases of high risk.
- Bolster New Jersey’s tourism industry through national marketing.
- Establish in law that the value of protecting property values through dune reconstruction offsets the loss in values caused by lost ocean views.

ARGUMENTS FOR THIS APPROACH

- The state economy and the livelihood of thousands depend on Shore tourism.
- Individual property owners are not at fault for damage from storms; they deserve society’s help.
- New Jerseyans have paid for years to help other Americans damaged by storms, floods, wildfires and earthquakes.
- Top-down planning dictates violate property rights and often overreach.
- Sandy was probably a once-in-a-generation storm; let’s not overreact.
- Using high-tech and social media, better emergency plans can limit harm.
- The histories of thousands of families are intertwined with the patterns of life down the Shore. You can’t just toss aside such deep emotional ties.
- Humans have and will always want to live near sand and ocean.
- Rebuilding quickly shows the nation New Jersey’s resilient spirit.
- If state and U.S. governments act effectively to help those harmed by the storm, it might restore some of the lost trust in government.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST THIS APPROACH

- Building roller coasters next to the ocean will never be a good idea. “Boardwalk” fun will still be fun, even if it moves a bit inland.
- Local control brought the Shore the overdevelopment and damaged dunes that worsened damage from Sandy.
- Sea levels are rising. The ocean will reclaim within a generation much of what is being built now under the false mantra of “restore the shore.”
- Individual property rights end where the individual’s decision clearly harms the properties of others.
- New Jersey has too many other priorities to spend all the money it would take to rebuild the old Shore, just to set up a costlier recovery next time.
- Plenty of oceanfront communities in other tourism states have learned to develop differently to limit storm damage.

RETHINK AND ADAPT

Our economic and emotional investments in the shore are indeed deep, but simply rebuilding the Shore the way it was puts them at needless risk. We can’t count on the nation’s taxpayers to come to our aid again, especially if we show we’ve learned nothing from this storm. Through smart regional planning, we can mitigate risk while preserving most of what we love about the Shore, including its economic vitality.

We must accept that in some areas it is folly to rebuild – or at least to rebuild in the same way. Individual property owners don’t have an unlimited right to do whatever they want; if their actions put the rest of the community at risk. And we can learn a lot from how oceanfront communities elsewhere have changed development patterns, building codes and infrastructure to limit harm from hurricanes.

PROPONENTS TEND TO FAVOR THESE ACTIONS

- Rebuild and expand dunes for flood protection. Pay for the local share of the work through assessments based on property values.
- With inclusive public input, create an enforceable master plan for Shore counties that bars development in high-risk areas, and shapes it in others.
- Create a regional planning agency with power to enforce the plan, and ensure its members represent a cross-section of interests.
- Base the master plan upon sound evidence about sea level rise.
- Identify the developed oceanfront areas that represent so much economic value and sunken investment they must be rebuilt. Focus limited government dollars on improving storm protection in those places.
- Compensate owners whose property is deemed unfit for rebuilding.
- Learn best practices from southern coastal areas on how to build more storm-resilient communities.

ARGUMENTS FOR THIS APPROACH

- Patterns of damage from Sandy teach how dramatically the choices made by one property owner can adversely others, even several communities away.
- One size never fits all. A rebuilding plan that makes sense in one community might make less sense in another.
- A short-term focus on “getting ready for the summer” can lead to unwise decisions that will bring long-term costs.
- Southern communities that endure frequent hurricanes can teach us some sound principles for living adaptively at ocean’s edge.
- With all its other needs, the state of New Jersey can’t afford to insulate Shore property owners from all risks of building near the ocean (i.e. “moral hazard”).
- The nation’s taxpayers will rebel against helping New Jersey if another major storm reveals we did little to limit the risks of how we build.
- The best use of storm aid is to finance smart adaptations that will reduce the need for massive recovery costs in the future.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST THIS APPROACH

- Regional planning produces red tape and unfunded mandates.
- The Shore is a place of business critical to the state’s economy. Unelected planners should not trump the market-driven decisions of businesses.
- With what money and by what formula will you compensate people whose family homes and businesses are wiped out by the dictates of a regional plan?
- Overreaction is costly, too. New Jersey is not Florida. Hurricanes will remain rare here.
- New Jersey ranks No. 4 national in federal taxes paid per capita, while ranking dead last in the amount of federal taxes returned to the state, per person. For years, we’ve paid to help other Americans recover from storms, floods, fires, twisters and quakes. And we don’t tell them how to live; we just send aid. Why shouldn’t we get the same consideration?
- This approach favors a set of halfway measures that will do little to counter the long-term impact of sea-level rise and climate change.
- This approach will do too little to protect the Shore’s ecologies and species against damage from overdevelopment.