

COASTAL UPDATE 2008

This year's coastal update comes at the end of a hard year. Ike cut a swath of destruction through the Upper Texas Coast. Wind farms have come to Lower Coast. Water problems continue in the mid coast and climate change is as-yet unaddressed. And of course the global economy sends shivers through the spine of all reasonable people. On the other hand, hard times provide opportunity as well as challenge. It is with this concept in mind that I offer this round of observations about the Texas coast.

This update was started as a report on a settlement agreement that I signed with Formosa Plastics. Over the years, it has morphed into an annual report on the State of the Texas coast from my perspective as an activist and environmental lawyer working the coast for over thirty years. A few years ago I started including a poem or two so beware and be warned. There is a poem or two ahead.

HURRICANE IKE

No event demanded the attention of the Upper Texas coast as did Ike. There are many important issues about Ike but none moreso than the fact that **IKE MISSED GALVESTON ISLAND AND THE WEST SHORE OF GALVESTON BAY**. The dirty side of Ike hit Bolivar and the McFaddin Refuge and Sabine Pass. Although extensive damage was done from the surge flooding, Ike did not do the damage that it could have done had it hit San Luis Pass as projected. That is the important fact to keep in mind when considering Ike.

The discussion post-Ike emphasizes the need for us to rethink our coastal development policies. Here are some of my favorites:

1. Pouring sand on the beach. Although pouring sand on the beach in front of million dollar houses makes the homeowners feel good, it is bad policy. It doesn't work. The sand is eroded away, sometimes within a few weeks of its deposition. The inescapable fact is that our barrier islands are eroding at a relatively fast rate and they are undependable building platforms. The beach moves. The vegetation line moves. And on top of that, sea level is rising due to climate change. If someone wants to live on a barrier island, they should do so with full knowledge of the risks. I should not be asked to subsidize their decision.
2. Coastal insurance. If someone wants to build a home on the bay or on a barrier island, I say "good for them". However, I should not be asked to subsidize that decision. Coastal flood insurance is provided by the federal government and subsidized by the U.S. taxpayer. Coastal wind insurance is provided by the State of Texas through the wind insurance pool and is subsidized by Texas ratepayers. Each of us should pay our own way. We should move coastal development back to a "pay as you go" policy.

3. Coastal flood maps. The coastal flood maps are a joke and would be laughable except for the fact that they are so important. Thursday night before Ike, surge tides in excess of 25 feet were projected for the Houston Ship Channel-area of Galveston Bay. The mapped 100 year flood elevation for areas adjacent to Galveston Bay is about 15 to 17 feet. Within a few hundred feet of bay edge, the elevation drops down to about 10 feet. This elevation is the minimum for floor slabs under local building regulations. This elevation is also used to determine flood protection for hazardous waste, oil storage, industrial solid waste, municipal solid waste, wastewater plants and radioactive facilities. If a surge tide of 20+ feet is in fact probable, why don't our flood plain maps reflect this risk? Why do we risk the expulsion of waste into the environment not to mention the loss of hundreds of millions of dollars worth of property?
4. Coastal Development. Our coastal development policy is to evacuate certain zones based upon the size of the hurricane. For the Houston-Galveston area, zones are set up for Categories 1 and 2, Category 3 and Categories 4 and 5. These evacuation zones are high risk development areas, even if the flood plain maps do not reflect this true risk. At this time, approximately 500,000 people live in these three zones with another 250,000 to 500,000 projected to move into this high risk area over the next few decades. Do we really want another half a million people moving into high risk evacuation zones? Can we safely evacuate that many people? Many people who should have evacuated when Ike struck will not stay for another so-called Category 2 storm. They will likely leave. Will those of us in the inner city decide to leave as well, rather than being subjected to living without electricity? Our current population stresses our resources to the maximum. It makes little to no sense to continue to develop where we cannot provide safety and security. In the long run, it hurts the taxpayers, our reputation and it just may kill those who move into these high risk areas.
5. Infrastructure Development. Major new infrastructure should be an investment for the future. New roads built today are expected to last for decades. Institutional decisions are expected to be made for the long term. It is in this context that we must view issues about the future of Galveston Island, the Bolivar Peninsula and Follets Island in Brazoria County. Today more than ever the economy of the United States is challenged. We cannot continue to print money. We have a pool of money and we must make wise decisions, just like a family. We need a budget. We need wise decision-making. It makes little sense to maintain a medical school in an area where we cannot protect the doctors or the students, where we cannot keep it open. Certain types of institutions simply should not be located in high risk areas. Similarly, NASA should seriously consider its future course of action in the Clear Lake area. This area is highly vulnerable to surge tide flooding. It needs to become flood proofed or moved. We do no one a service by pretending that these problems do not exist. We need to address them to protect our future and the lives of those dependant upon these institutions.

6. We need to recognize and incorporate the ability of the natural system to absorb floods into our thinking about coastal development. A tremendous volume of water flooded portions of Jefferson and Chambers County, but relatively little economic damage was done because the areas were natural wetlands that absorbed the surge tide, held the stormwater, and then released it back to Gulf over time. We need more natural areas set aside to absorb flood damages, We need to take advantage of the ability of the natural system to help us, to work for us. In order to do this, we need to set land aside, to protect it, to allow the value of our ecological capital to be realized. From a dollar investment standpoint, buying and setting aside natural areas may be the most effective infrastructure development we can make.

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