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Virginia's Leadership in the Race Against Sea-Level Rise

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RESILIENCY

Olsen: Virginia's leadership in the race against sea-level rise

By Paul Olsen Feb 11, 2016

Last October 25, in a Commentary column titled "[Virginia's road to resiliency](#)," I wrote, "Coastal Virginia leads the way in pulling together federal, state, regional and municipal resources to develop best practices for dealing with flooding." Since then, Virginia has assumed a position of national leadership and has witnessed impressive initial results.

Those results have been noticed in Washington. Visiting Old Dominion University in November, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry described the university as an institution to emulate. "The work that ODU is doing" in sea-level rise, Kerry said, "is work that every university should be doing."

In January, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development awarded Virginia \$120.5 million to address sea level rise and recurrent flooding. The grant application focused on "shovel-ready projects" as well as economic resilience initiatives in Hampton Roads.

Meanwhile, Virginia created an innovative living-with-water approach, "thRIVE: Resilience in Virginia." The goal of this plan is to "unite the region, create coastal resilience, build water management solutions, improve economic vitality and strengthen vulnerable neighborhoods."

Pulling all of these initiatives together will require research and technical expertise. To address this challenge, the General Assembly is considering — under the leadership of Gov. Terry McAuliffe and the chairman of the Joint Flooding Subcommittee, Del. Chris Stolle — HB 903, a proposal to create and fund the Commonwealth Center for Recurrent Flooding Resiliency. The plan has also won the support of U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine and U.S. Reps. Scott Rigell and Rob Wittman.

The center would leverage the strengths of Old Dominion and the College of William and Mary to provide support for state and local planners and decision-makers and to help Virginia win critical federal funds such as the HUD grant.

The planning for the center exemplifies the strong relationship between Old Dominion's sea-level-rise initiative and William and Mary's Virginia Institute of Marine Science, as well as between the leaders of the institutions, John R. Broderick and W. Taylor Reveley III. Other partnerships have sprung up to address these challenges, bringing together the Hampton Roads Planning District, local municipalities and the military.

While these results are impressive, recent coastal and inland flooding such as we have seen in Hampton Roads and Floyd County demands we keep these partnerships on task and focused on resiliency challenges across the commonwealth. Through this collaboration, Virginia will remain in the vanguard in the race against sea-level rise.

The leadership in the commonwealth understands this. In October, Secretary of Public Safety Brian Moran, in partnership with Secretary of Natural Resources Molly Joseph Ward, began a project funded by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security — the Regional Resiliency Dashboard Initiative — to define the key resiliency indicators across Virginia, so we can better allocate our limited resources.

As a commonwealth, we should be proud of our recent accomplishments and the accolades we are receiving by federal and not-for-profit organizations. But we must not linger too long on the awards podium, for in the race against rising sea levels, "time and tide wait for no one."

Paul Olsen is the director of Programs and Partnerships at Old Dominion University, as well as a senior adviser for resiliency for the Commonwealth of Virginia. He previously commanded the Norfolk District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Contact him at polсен@odu.edu.

