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Virginia's Road to Resiliency

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Olsen: Virginia's road to resiliency

■ RISING SEAS

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THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

A fisherman braved the churning surf at Sandbridge in Virginia Beach earlier this month. Hampton Roads is moving to address rising sea levels.

By Paul Olsen

The seas around coastal Virginia have risen at an average of 6 millimeters a year for the past century. For the non-scientist, that equals the width of a smartphone every decade, so this is a manageable problem if we take immediate action.

As a commonwealth and nation of concerned citizens, we must begin to balance our tendency to research this issue with our responsibility to act upon it. To be successful, we must take a “whole of government and community” approach, for the entire commonwealth has a stake in coastal Virginia’s ability to learn to live with water and thrive.

Encouraging signs using this approach have begun to emerge at the state and federal level. In Norfolk, for example, Old Dominion University President John R. Broderick

established, in 2010, the Climate and Sea Level Rise Initiative, which brings together some of the world's leading experts to find solutions for communities facing flooding and sea-level-rise challenges.



In 2013, the Hampton Roads Intergovernmental Pilot, initiated by the White House and convened through ODU by retired Navy meteorologist and Capt. Ray Toll, launched the nation's first "whole of government and community" pilot project.

Through this study, coastal Virginia leads the way in pulling together federal, state, regional and municipal resources to develop best practices for dealing with flooding that can be applied around the globe. The city of Norfolk recently hosted the "Dutch Dialogues," providing a much-needed international perspective.

To use a football analogy, Old Dominion has built the stadium in which a number of key players from across the commonwealth have gathered to get their game on.

Quote



Coastal Virginia leads the way in pulling together federal, state, regional and municipal resources to develop best practices for dealing with flooding.

One of the first was Sen. Tim Kaine, who focused on sea-level rise in 2008 while he served as governor. It was Kaine, along with our congressional representatives, who authorized and funded a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers report that provided a plan for rising seas following Hurricane Sandy. This study will serve as the impetus for Col. Jason Kelly, the Norfolk District commander, to request federal funding for future resiliency projects such as the recent beach replenishment at Sandbridge and the venerable sea wall in Norfolk.

And under Sen. Kaine's leadership, Old Dominion University, the Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS) and the College of William and Mary are working to establish the National Center for Sea Level Rise — the first of its kind in the U.S.

Recognizing the public safety and economic threat posed by rising seas, Gov. Terry McAuliffe had the foresight to establish a Climate Change Commission, whose recommendations are under his final review. Potential commission recommendations, such as building a "connective tissue" that links federal, state and local efforts, are encouraging.



The General Assembly also is moving the ball forward. Led by Del. Chris Stolle, the Recurrent Flooding Sub-Panel of Virginia's Secure Commonwealth Panel is finalizing a report that may call for best practices that are shared and planning efforts that are coordinated and equitably

distributed, based on the needs and available resources of our coastal communities.

At the foundation of these efforts is research accomplished at Virginia's public universities, including Old Dominion, VIMS and the College of William and Mary, as well as our federal partners, NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. While this research is by no means over, it has provided needed information for our federal, commonwealth and local leaders to take action. It is important for these institutions to get involved even more by helping localities, the commonwealth and federal agencies turn theory into practice.

A solid strategy is necessary to move from research to application, and we need only look to the National Response Framework as our guide. Born from Hurricane Andrew in 1992, this framework served well during Sandy by assigning roles and missions to federal, state and municipal endeavors.

Communities such as Norfolk, Virginia Beach and Poquoson are planning for flooding and sea-level rise, but they need help communicating and coordinating their resiliency requirements through all levels of government.

To remedy this bureaucratic challenge, the commonwealth, in an enormously proactive initiative, is developing a resiliency dashboard through which communities gain credit for resiliency work already done and highlight where they need assistance.

The dashboard will let communities identify specific requirements, request resources they lack and develop their own "road-to-resiliency" plans based on available resources, local conditions and sociopolitical challenges.

The dashboard will also serve as a central repository of best practices and provide an official community representation to federal partners.

We are fortunate in Virginia that there is nothing stopping us from creating an effective community-centric resiliency campaign plan, complete with metrics that measure our progress enabled by resiliency centers at the state and federal levels.

The game is on. It is time for action.

Paul Olsen is the director of federal, commonwealth and municipal programs 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.

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