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Hampton Roads must rise to challenge in reducing effects of climate change



Earth Day photos from Daily Press archives.

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Water defines Hampton Roads. It divides our population centers, drives our commerce, complicates our travel and buoys our recreation.

If conditions continue, water may also be our ruin. A combination of rising sea levels and sinking land puts homes and businesses ever closer to the water's edge. It imperils thousands of people and billions of dollars in resources.

We cannot reverse that fate, but we can work to mitigate it with innovative planning, regional cooperation, thoughtful investment and visionary leadership. The coming years will determine the future of the community and, like the sea, we must rise to the challenge.

Earth Day began as a way to draw attention to environmental concerns so there could be no more appropriate moment to focus on how climate change promises to redefine the landscape in Hampton Roads.

Nor is there a more massive task facing this region. Sea levels have risen 14 inches here since 1930, outpacing the global average of 5-8 inches. Subsidence, the natural sinking of the land, contributes greatly to the problem here, but the cumulative effect is that only New Orleans has more Americans at risk from these changing conditions than Hampton Roads.

Residents of the area already possess oodles of anecdotal evidence — of streets and houses flooding after heavy rain storms or how high tide encroaches further up the beaches and banks of our coastal communities. But scientific research and modeling paints a wide-reaching and deeply frightening picture of what we're up against.

For instance, a 2012 study by the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission estimates that a 3-foot sea-level increase in the Hampton Roads region, which it deems possible by 2100, would cost the region between \$12 billion and \$87 billion. That would permanently submerge or regularly flood up to 877 miles of roads here.

Those are worst-case estimates, of course. Climate science can be a tricky business and it's possible that the effects we're seeing could slow. But it makes sense to consider strategies to blunt the possible impact of changing sea levels, recognizing that a failure to do so could provide catastrophic.

The Defense Department is already knee-deep in its preparations. Last year, it released a Climate Change Adaptation Roadmap to ready the area's large concentration of personnel, facilities and equipment for a projected 1.5- to 2-foot change in sea levels during the next 20-50 years.

Local governments are facing a similarly daunting challenge. Norfolk estimates the ongoing environmental impact of worsening conditions will necessitate a public investment of at least \$1 billion in the coming decades. The city must construct new sea walls and radically overhaul its storm water management system to keep residences and businesses dry.

Flooding problems already evident in Norfolk are similarly apparent in communities stretching far up the

Peninsula. Their price tags may not be as substantial as Norfolk's, but mitigating the effect of changing sea levels promises to consume an ever-greater share of public budgets.

Local governments cannot afford to stem the rising tide themselves, and will require guidance and funding from Washington and Richmond. That has already begun in drips and drabs, but we need to see more resources devoted to this pressing task.

Nor is independent planning by each city or county likely to have a cumulative effect. Rather, on this issue among so many others, we need to formulate and execute a regional strategy and cooperate in our collective interest. To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, we must work to stay afloat together or assuredly we shall all drown separately.

The **Old Dominion University** Center for Sea Level Rise began last year as an attempt to create a coordinated, intergovernmental response to climate change. It is an initiative that could prove invaluable to Hampton Roads in the coming years.

Our concern is that the ODU center is simply the latest to tackle this complex and complicated problem. We have seen numerous task forces and working groups expend a great deal of time and energy, without demonstrable success.

So what we need from our leaders at the local, state and federal levels is to show the type of urgency the issue demands, and to present thoughtful, regional solutions that can make a lasting difference in Hampton Roads.

It is no longer a question of "Come hell or high water" in Hampton Roads. The high water is coming. Hell is what will follow without action.

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