

SUFFOLK CLOSEUP

More To Come

BY KARL GROSSMAN

We dodged a bullet with Hurricane Henri hitting Rhode Island head-on rather than us last week. But the hurricane threat is far from gone. With the hurricane season running from June 1 to November 30, the threat in the short term remains possible, and assured in the long term.

And this comes as climate change is causing more frequent and more severe hurricanes, and other extreme weather events. Global warming is heating waters on which hurricanes feed. States along the Gulf of Mexico have been the most impacted in recent times by quickly developing major hurricanes. But the Atlantic coast, including where we are, is a hurricane alley, too.

It seemed definite (as much as hurricane predictions can be definite, although forecasts have gotten very good in recent years) that Henri would strike us.

"Henri Sets Sights On The East End" said the Newsday headline. Its story began: "Long Island stands in the crosshairs of a hurricane that could potentially wreak havoc with flooding, power losses, downed trees and all the misery that come with that."

As for electric outages, an accompanying article was headlined: "Dire Warning On Outages." It began: "PSEG Long Island said the potential for 'severe damage' from Hurricane Henri could cause outages that last up to two weeks." Two weeks!

At gas stations on Long Island were lines of cars with people filling up containers for gas to feed generators. At hardware stores, there was a run on bar oil for chainsaws getting readied to deal with fallen trees. And there was justifiable high anxiety.

But, amazingly, on the morning that Henri was to clobber us came the report that it had shifted to the east and would likely make landfall in Rhode Island. "A difference of 30 miles, compared to the earth's diameter of 7,900 miles, may not seem like much, but it can be when you're dealing with a hurricane," said Newsday meteorologist Bill Korbel.

What's to learn? Two major things:

For decades, I've written about the need to underground electric lines on Long Island. In April, I related how Kevin Law, on his last day as president and CEO of the Long Island Association, sent a letter to President Joe Biden and Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer requesting

federal help for the undergrounding of electric lines.

I noted that Mr. Law knew the situation well from previously being president and CEO of the Long Island Power Authority, which owns those lines. He asked that funds be made "available to make electric grids more resilient to climate disasters on Long Island ... to bury the electric grid on Long Island." He linked this to "efforts to invest in our national infrastructure."

Mr. Law pointed out that there are "approximately 10,000 miles of overhead [electric] lines" on Long Island. "Major storms, including Hurricane Isaias, Superstorm Sandy and Hurricane Gloria, demonstrated the immense vulnerabilities of our grid. These storms caused significant disruption and widespread damage such as downed trees and fallen power lines and left most of Long Island's residents and businesses in the dark, with some out for longer than a week."

Hurricane Gloria, in 1985, caused a loss of electricity to 700,000 electric ratepayers on Long Island — but nearly all telephone service continued without interruption. Why? Because, in the 1970s, telephone lines here began being placed underground.

The details of the infrastructure legislation are still to be worked out. There is time to include funding for undergrounding electric lines on Long Island. A push by our federal representatives is needed.

Then, reemphasized by Henri, there is the need for relocation of structures built in vulnerable areas of our coasts.

"Fortunately, Long Island was spared the brunt of Henri," says Kevin McAllister, founder and president of the Sag Harbor-based organization Defend H2O. "But our sigh of relief will be short-lived, as there most certainly will be a next time. Whether it's a named storm or a winter nor'easter, storm surge will be a constant and growing threat and compounded by an accelerating sea level rise.

"Our days of living on wetland fringes, sand spits, isthmuses and some sections of barrier islands are numbered," he said. "The sooner we accept the inevitable and monumental changes that are underway, the sooner we can start moving back, off and out of vulnerable areas, the more resilient we will be. We know where they exist, so let's get started.

"For Long Islanders will rue the day we failed to listen to Henri's wake-up call."