

On the Move

BY KARL GROSSMAN



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“The water is coming — there’s no longer much doubt about that,” began an article in The Washington Post this month.

A just-issued analysis, it reported, done by Climate Central, a Princeton, New Jersey-based nonprofit research group, determined that “hundreds of thousands of homes ... and other properties” would “slip below swelling tide lines over the next few decades.”

That increased sea level rise is already happening.

The Climate Central researchers found, said The Post, that “nearly 650,000 individual, privately owned parcels across as many as 4.4 million acres of land” along the coastlines of the United States “are projected to fall below changing tidal boundaries by 2050. The land affected could swell to 9.1 million acres by 2100.”

Long Island will be among the areas heavily affected.

Indeed, the East Hampton Town Board this month, in a unanimous vote, approved a Coastal Assessment Resilience Plan “in recognition of the need for proactive planning to address its vulnerabilities to sea level rise, shoreline erosion and flooding.”

CARP, an analysis put together over two years, flatly warned that the projected range of sea level rise “will transform East Hampton into a series of islands with permanent submergence of low-lying areas as early as 2070.”

It says: “Rising sea levels and increased intensity of coastal storms undoubtedly will have an impact on nearshore homes and communities.”

CARP proposes a “retreat” of waterfront development away from the shoreline.

And that is a breakthrough for this area.

Perhaps “retreat” isn’t the best word to use. In a prescient talk in Quogue in 2013, titled “Alternatives for Protecting Our Dunes and Beaches,” Dr. Robert Young, director of the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines at Western Carolina University and co-author of the then recently published book “The Rising Sea,” said, “I don’t say ‘retreat’ anymore.” That’s because Americans, he said, don’t like to talk about retreating.

Said Young: “No, we say ‘relocate.’”

Whether it’s called “retreat” or “relocate,” that is what is needed in the face of rising seas largely caused by melting glaciers caused by global warming.

Still, despite the realism out of East Hampton, all over Long Island, says Kevin McAllister, founder and president of the Sag Harbor-based organization Defend H2O, in an effort to ostensibly protect houses built along coasts, what’s now happening is a “rapid transformation of natural shorelines” with the placement of steel and vinyl bulkheads, geotextile sandbags and giant boulders.

This effort at “armoring” shorelines, says McAllister, “if left unchecked will erase walkable beaches and critical shoreline habitat” — and also lead to more coastal erosion, as armoring, in fact, ends up accelerating coastal erosion.

In a number of states, the folly of coastal armoring is being recognized.

Stateline, the web publication of Pew Charitable Trusts, published an article last year about Virginia and Washington having “recently enacted laws to discourage armoring structures and promote ‘living’ shorelines, which use natural elements to slow erosion and maintain habitats.”

Stateline said “seawalls and bulkheads ... known collectively as shoreline armoring, can block the natural flow of sand and sediment down the coast and multiply the forces of waves onto nearby shoreline — accelerating erosion elsewhere.”

The New York Times last week reported on how “a little-noticed section” of recent climate legislation passed by Congress and signed into law by President Joe Biden marks “a shift by the federal government toward funding nature-based climate solutions.”

It said: “Escalating climate threats have prompted a continuing debate among policymakers and experts about how best to guard against devastating damage, between those who prioritize building man-made infrastructure like sea walls — sometimes called “gray infrastructure” — and those who favor nature-based solutions, or so-called green infrastructure.”

Long Island is far from alone. A headline this month in USA Today: “Oceans rise, houses fall. The California beach home is turning into a nightmare.” Its story said: “Tens of thousands of people who live along California’s coast may be forced to flee in coming decades as climate change leads to rising seas and makes swaths of the state’s iconic coast uninhabitable.”

Harmonizing with nature and relocating structures built in the teeth of the sea, both are essential as seas rise. Still, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation is allowing armoring all over Long Island with “permissive permitting,” says McAllister. And many local boards, he says, aren’t doing much better.