

The Times-Union

OPINION

E4 Sunday, May 27, 2018 THE TIMES-UNION

OUR VIEW

Flood risks: Action is required

Waterways are the lifeblood of Jacksonville. The St. Johns River and its tributaries go just about everywhere in this huge county.

We're used to occasional nuisance flooding in areas like San Marco or the near Southside. But what if the frequency and extent of flooding increases? What if the city is drowning in water?

This editorial page has been writing for years about the convincing and growing evidence that the Earth is warming and that the dangers to Florida and Jacksonville are especially dire.

The skeptics challenging the science suggest that every major scientific organization in the United States, such as the National Academy of Science, the National Meteorological Society and NASA are either wrong or part of some vast conspiracy.

As the Meteorological Society explains on its website: "Climate is always changing. However, many of the observed changes ... are beyond what can be explained by the natural variability of the climate."

The evidence of increased flooding is lapping on our doorsteps in Florida. It can be seen with flooding on sunny days in Miami Beach or St. Augustine.

And it was seen when Hurricanes Matthew and Irma struck Northeast Florida with devastating impact. Downtown was hit with the compounding effect of high tides.

This editorial page has long advocated a conservative approach to climate change, the "no regrets" approach once advocated by Mitt Romney. This means taking a risk management, insurance-oriented, businesslike approach to the risks of flooding.

That means assessing the risks, then coming up with a series of options for dealing with them. For flood-prone areas, that could mean hardening structures such as putting houses on stilts. It may mean raising roads and utilities.

It could mean retreating from an area. Federal buyouts are being offered to South Shores residents where repeated floods have hit their neighborhood near the Southbank.

For future development, it means building flood resistance into plans as well as protecting neighboring structures.

As the Times-Union noted in its special report on flooding risks, the city last year began working on changes to its 2030 master plan in order to prepare for sea level rise.

The Northeast Regional Planning Council set up a special committee to study these oncoming risks several years ago. It's called P2R2 for Public/Private Regional Resiliency.

The council has been taking the businesslike approach that we advocate. As the group writes in an opinion column on Page E5 today, “Everyone who is building a structure now, regardless of its use, should consider the potential impacts of flood, wind, fire, sea level rise and climate change.”

Planners have their role. But they don’t tend to be out front. Jacksonville needs an aggressive, thoughtful approach to dealing with flooding issues.

Jacksonville’s elected leaders, including the mayor and City Council, should be doing more.

The city could use the kind of study that Jacksonville Community Council Inc. used to conduct. We need to inform and educate the populace about the risks, the dangers and the solutions facing us.

Without an active JCCI in force, then the city needs to create such a vehicle for this issue. We need a community-wide conversation about flooding risks and solutions.

The city of St. Augustine, especially with Mayor Nancy Shaver’s leadership, sees the impact of floods and is taking a proactive approach to dealing with the risks.

“Jacksonville tends not to be on the cutting edge on many things,” said City Council Member Lori Boyer in the Times-Union’s special report.

But we used to be when “Bold New City of the South” meant something like an embrace of progressive government.

Does Jacksonville need a multi-billion flood protection project? How would we pay for it? Could we get federal and state help for funding it? Could JEA be tapped in some way to help finance it?

Turning away from flooding risks is not an option, not to responsible government.

The stress to homeowners could be seen on the residents of the South Shores neighborhood when they were considering whether to take up offers to sell their homes to the government.

On Oct. 1, we will commemorate the 50th anniversary of combining the city and county governments — consolidation.

It was meant to take on big, bold challenges like this one. We must not fail the future; our children and grandchildren will be watching.

Times-Union Editorial Board