

# Rising Above?

THE VERY NATURE OF HAMPTON ROADS IS CHANGING—AND RESEARCHERS AND LEADERS ARE STILL SEARCHING FOR AFFORDABLE SOLUTIONS



**T**he land is sinking, and the water is rising, and no one's sure what we should do. Sounds like something out of a horror movie, but it's not—it's life in Hampton Roads. Fortunately for residents and businesses, officials are paying attention.

In March, Virginia Sea Grant, a joint effort with University of Virginia's Institute for Environmental Negotiation, the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission, the City of Virginia Beach, Wetlands Watch and Old Dominion University, held "listening sessions" in Virginia Beach. It was a chance for residents to voice their opinions on floods and reports of sea-levels rising. More than 100 residents participated. Clay Bernick, Virginia Beach's environment and sustainability manager, was later

part of a group that spoke to the city council in May about residents' concerns and the city's current and future plans.

Back in 2009, the city developed a comprehensive plan to avoid disaster. Among the recommendations: Prohibit construction in floodplains without acceptable mitigation; build on higher ground where it is less susceptible to sea level rise and make higher ground the prime focus of development; aggressively retrofit existing storm drains throughout Virginia Beach into state-of-the-art stormwater management facilities to minimize flooding after heavy storms; and develop measures to increase reasonable structural setbacks in order to effectively protect properties facing the Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic Ocean.

Yet, more action is needed.

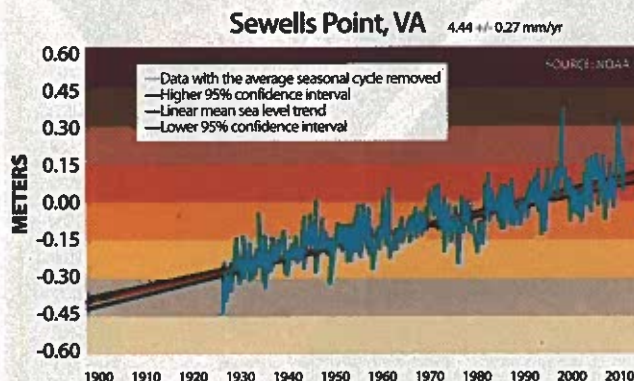
Benjamin McFarlane, a physical and environmental planner with Hampton Roads Planning District Commission (HRPDC), also spoke about his three-year grant project with the Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program. He called for "more data and better models" to understand the influence of sea-level rising,

On June 16, he presented another update to the HRPDC, noting that he had outlined general costs and benefits of various options to combat the problem. The report had not been released as *Hampton Roads Magazine* went to press. The research and report for the grant project are due to be completed by this December. It is hoped that all of the concerned cities will buy into the final recommendations, yet this is a case of there being no easy, inexpensive answers—and it seems like the world is watching. We might be one of the first areas to face this problem on a large scale, but we won't be the last.

This year, PBS's *Need to Know* and *The New York Times* featured Norfolk and its flooding woes. A couple from Larchmont, a community near Old Dominion University, worried about how many more floods they could handle. They used to see a few puddles that they'd have to battle. Now, they feel like streets flood regularly. Four major floods in five years have damaged their appliances, including furnaces and hot water heaters. For them, the situation is getting worse and more costly to recover from. Local environmental activist William "Skip" Stiles, executive director of Wetlands Watch, appeared on *Need to Know*, noting that both residents and leaders are struggling with the issue. Residents don't have enough money to replace lost items, and city officials don't have much of a budget to improve conditions or buy back houses. Councilwoman Dr. Theresa Whibley noted on PBS that the city has "nowhere near enough money" to address the problem. Stiles is worried about spending money on what might be temporary solutions. Norfolk Mayor Paul Fraim has said that the city could create retreat zones, turning some areas into public parks or leaving them empty.

But again, what about the money?

Norfolk certainly has a lot to overcome. Reporter Leslie Kaufman from *The New York Times* succinctly outlined the city's triple-whammy hit: The water from the rivers is rising; the land is sinking; and Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli is saying a University of Virginia climate scientist



committed fraud in research "proving" climate change.

Putting politics aside, the problem is real: Kaufman writes, "... Norfolk has experienced the highest relative increase in sea level on the East Coast—14.5 inches since 1930, according to readings by the Sewells Point naval station."

None of this is news to Dr. Larry Atkinson, a professor of oceanography at Old Dominion University, and he's offered his expertise to be part of the solution. He created The Old Dominion University Climate Change and Sea Level Rise Initiative (CCSLRI) last fall, meeting with nearly 100 faculty members, administrators, industry and organization leaders, state and local officials and international colleagues to gather their ideas.

Part of CCSLRI's goal is to educate the citizens of Hampton Roads, and Atkinson is doing the basic work of explaining sea-level rising:

"Local sea level rise is caused by three things, all about equal," he says. "The warming of the ocean; glacial forebulge subsidence (the land shifting as glaciers melt); and freshwater flowing into the ocean from melting glaciers and ice caps."

Atkinson has hosted a faculty presentation by Wetland Watch's Stiles and a public talk by Rear Adm. David Titley, the Navy's top oceanographer, about climate change and the Navy's ability to face it. He's also written on the topic; an essay he penned in the spring for the *Free Lance Star* in Fredericksburg explained the science behind the rise and its ramifications. Newspapers countrywide picked up the essay, an indication that many Americans are concerned.

With Atkinson, his fellow researchers and leaders like Stiles, Bernick and McFarlane, there is hope that science can first prove to non-believers the causes of sea-level rising and, more important, introduce solutions—or at least the best possible coping mechanisms. Hampton Roads' residents might for once feel like they're part of a region, facing and conquering a problem together. After all, coastal Virginia Beach and Larchmont residents are affected, along with people in East Ocean View, Downtown Norfolk, Poquoson, and parts of Portsmouth, Hampton and Gloucester, according to Atkinson. On this issue, we'll most likely sink or swim together. **HRM**

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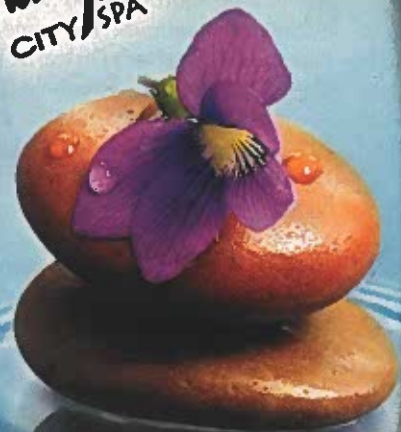
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