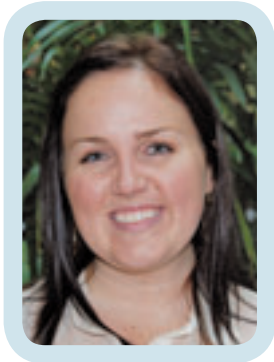


Rebuild, or Retreat?



The parade of hurricanes that pounded the Gulf Coast in 2008 has reawakened a discussion which fell dormant too quickly after Hurricane Katrina. When violent storms pummel neighborhoods and vacation spots, leaving behind virtually unrecognizable coastal ghost towns, it begs the timeless post-natural disaster question: Rebuild, or retreat?

Legislators, residents, business owners, scientists and developers are joining in the great debate. Those in favor of rebuilding point to the significance of hard-hit locations—historically, culturally and as a place people call home. In the case of Galveston, Texas, battered most recently by Hurricane Ike, pro-renewal arguments

include famous architecture, picturesque beaches and a population of about 57,000 people who take pride in the fact that their city has rebounded from storm-related catastrophe time and again.

Supporters also compare Galveston's situation to that of other areas susceptible to natural disasters—Tornado Alley or earthquake-prone L.A., for instance. "Should these places, too, be abandoned after Mother Nature wreaks havoc on them?" they ask, often noting that the aftermath, as unfortunate as it can be, presents an opportunity for more environmentally friendly and structurally sound development, new jobs and a much-needed economy boost.

Others, however, question whether time, money and effort should be invested in rebuilding a sharply eroding region that will almost certainly be devastated again. In September 1900, 120-mile-per-hour winds and a tidal surge brought the booming city of Galveston to a halt. Six thousand people were killed and more than 3,600 buildings destroyed in the storm's wake, making it the deadliest natural disaster in U.S. history. Severe hurricanes continued to sweep through on a regular basis—in 1915, 1919, 1961 and 1983, to name some of the most notable.

What if the island's \$14.5-million seawall cannot save the island when the next storm brews in the Gulf of Mexico? It is time to put an end to this recurring cycle of lost lives and properties, according to proponents for retreat. It is unfair, they argue, to burden taxpayers by sinking federal relief dollars into the rebuilding projects of, literally, a sinking island.

I think it is important for residents and their leaders to head the fight for renewal in this new year, but they must consider the flip side of the coin as well and tailor efforts accordingly. Designating shorelines as public recreation spaces and building further inland, for instance, could help create middle ground in this debate. To maintain the health and viability of a vulnerable area like Galveston, redevelopment restrictions need to be established and enforced; this is the best way to support sustainable and fiscally responsible restoration.

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