Moderator’s Report – Group 4

Date of Forum: July 15, 2013

Location of Forum: WHYY

Moderators: Germaine Ingram and Loretta Raider

Group Description: We had 14 people in the group: 6 men and 8 women; from visual observation and self-description, one African American woman and one immigrant male of East Indian extraction; age range: late 20’s to 70’s. Interests in the subject of the forum were variously personal, professional, and academic: among the personal stakes, several people own property at the Shore---permanent residences, vacation homes, and rental property; several spoke of growing up at the Shore, or of going there for years, of planning to retire there; one person stated that she has friends and family who suffered property damage in Hurricane Sandy; one person who identified himself as an immigrant, said that going to the Jersey shore was part of introducing himself to the US. Among the professional and academic interests represented were: a landscape architect and transplant from the Gulf Coast, a journalist and lobbyist who focuses on topics related to climate change, an intern at NewsWorks, a filmmaker who has “no emotional attachment”, but is interested in the “big questions’ related to climate change and coastal development, a recent graduate in city planning who has done research on climate and coastal change, someone who recently moved to North Jersey and works on how cities adapt to climate change----has a child and is “nervous” about what is to come. One participant talked of having attended a church service on the Jersey Shore and being struck by the pastor stating that in the foreseeable future the church will no longer be standing. No one identified himself/hereself as having a business at the Shore.

This group was very thoughtful, at times philosophical. They listened to one another and responded to one another’s comments and questions. They were interested in learning from others’ technical knowledge base. They related to the three approaches as points on a continuum, and were inclined to see merit in some aspects of each approach. They expressed uncertainty about how to respond to the inevitable nature-driven change to the Jersey coast. No one claimed to have “the answer”. There were a few people who tended to be more vocal than others, but everyone participated in the conversation.

Approach 1: Rebuild and Prepare

• Concern and frustration over people who reject or ignore the scientific evidence that climate change is real, and that storm events are likely to become more frequent and intense.
• There is a new paradigm created by new storm patterns. We need to make decisions based on the scientific evidence.
• How do we educate people and get them to listen to the evidence about climate change? People have the right to have their own opinion, but they should be informed by the best available information.
• Suggestion by one participant that there needs to be fundamental reframing of the way we think about the issues: we should stop trying to figure out how to protect ourselves against nature and start thinking about how we live compatibly with nature. How would such reframing affect our public and private choices?
• Who should pay for recovery from Sandy? According to one participant, a recent report states that FEMA will spend $62 Billion in New Jersey this year? (One participant asked how the costs compare
from municipality to municipality. Someone else said that the breakdown is available in a recently report that is available on-line.)

- One participant questioned the will of citizens to pay the cost of addressing other people’s losses. He said “they don’t want to pay for teachers”, suggesting that if people don’t want to pay for a public good like education, they will be even less inclined to support rebuilding and replacement of private property.
- There was general consensus that it’s important to address the immediate needs of people who have been displaced from their homes and businesses, but the question remains as to who should pay those bills. Someone said that the government should create pools of private insurance, which is essentially the mechanism by which insurance is written for Shore properties today.
- One person was highly critical of the response of local government after the hurricane hit. It was “so disjointed”. Also, newspapers, the Inquirer in particular, were “useless”. The only reliable and up-to-date information was through social media.
- One participant said that private citizens need to organize themselves to address emergency needs. He mentioned how in the wake of the storm, neighbors came together to provide for food and water, and charge cell phones. He said that there is resiliency in communities that is not being mobilized. When asked what kind of infrastructure exists or could be created to galvanize community self-help capacity, he suggested community-based organizations, and perhaps philanthropic entities. He said that we need to manage our expectations about what government can do. Several people seemed to support this viewpoint.
- There was a general comment that it’s worth studying the differences in the responses to Katrina and the responses to Sandy. (Since we were moving to another topic, there was not an opportunity to tease out what we might expect to find in such a comparison.)

Approach 2: Rethink and Adapt

- One participant noted that a large percentage of New Jersey’s economic base comes from the Shore community. She asked what it would mean to the State’s financial status if the Shore were not rebuilt.
- Another participant, a city planner, noted that her research indicates that tourism has weakened as an economic driver over the past couple of decades. She said that continued reliance on tourism might not be a prudent and sustainable economic model.
- Who pays for rebuilding and where does the money come from? Complaints about FEMA-backed insurance are that’s it’s not based on real risk analysis----there’s an imbalance between where the money is coming from and who/what gets compensated.
- One participant noted recent changes in FEMA insurance guidelines; she asked “at what point will it become better for me to self-insure?”
- There was general frustration about the ability of developers to circumvent the rules and game the system----“The developers always get their way.” This view fueled skepticism about whether developers could be made to comply, regardless of how much smart regional planning there was.
- One person commented that many of the politicians are builders or contractors in the construction trades-----“They don’t have an interest in regional planning.”
- People asked who would run the planning effort, and how would planning authorities get developers to comply with standards.
- “We don’t know how to fight the forces of power and privilege in order to serve the public interest.”
- One person noted that there is a general bias against government regulation. This makes it difficult to figure out ways to counter narrow private interests.
• There was some discussion of creating initiatives that bring together diverse stakeholders to do visioning and planning in the public interest. “There are models for these types of initiatives, but I’m not sure it would work in New Jersey.”
• One participant said that in building such initiatives, it’s important to include what might be considered “unlikely suspects.” For example, she mentioned that there is a strong coalition of surfers—— “They could be a great resource. You can’t discount people just because they don’t vote.” This drew a comment from one participant that “second home owners get forgotten.”
• One person noted that in addition to the fact that people with powerful connections get around the rules, there “aren’t a lot of great rules”. The building codes are fragmented, unclear, and complicated; there are multiple codes that don’t work coherently.
• Someone asked, what would be encompassed within the proposed planning region. How close or distant would the decision makers be to the people who’s interests they were affecting?
• There seemed to be general support for the comment that once you recognize that you’re living in harm’s way, you have to plan and build in a way that responds to those risks. After all, how many times do you build and rebuild in high-risk areas?
• There are people who recognize the risks and would prefer to rebuild in a way that creates more safeguards. However they don’t have the money to rebuild in a way other than the “same old way”.
• One person asked the overarching question of whether it’s possible to have smart “top-down” goals and planning that can spur incremental approaches.

Approach 3: Restore and Retreat

• The fact that some towns that once existed no longer exist should be a wake-up call to it being time to start thinking about new ways of designing and building----about building with nature in mind.
• Looking at the example of Sandy Hook indicates predictable patterns of how climate conditions are affecting the coast. Time and again the beach gets washed away and has to be replenished.
• One participant imagined how public housing residents might respond to the conversations in the forum. Drawing on his experience with public housing residents on Coney Island, he said that low-income residents of public housing enjoy life on the coast as much as wealthier people. They want to have a voice in the design and placement of low-income housing.
• When asked what the trade-offs would be if there were to be a retreat from the coast, responses were that the boardwalks would be lost, and houses and businesses would move across the street. People in the group were not troubled by these changes, but know that there are people who would be. Multi-million dollar homes would lose significant property value. There will be people who will want to stay where they are, and have the resources to do it.
• It’s not just the coastline at stake----inland geography has also been damaged, and people who live inland are affected by concentration of resources on coastal properties.
• What’s it mean to have a “slow retreat” from the coast? It will likely take more than a generation to implement a retreat, and what happens in the meanwhile, when the next major storm comes, and the one after that?
• A participant who said he likes camping proposed consideration of housing that would be temporary and seasonal.
• When asked whether anyone had a vision of what Approach 3 would look like, people seemed at a loss. One participant said that “we don’t know what we don’t know”, and that citizens need to learn to live with uncertainty as work on addressing the complexity of the issues proceeds.
• There will be always be pressure to respond to the immediate needs of people who suffer storm losses. This will impede focusing attention and resources on long-range planning around a dramatically
different strategy. One person commented that that people can’t focus on the long-term while their homes and businesses are under water.

Common Ground

• The three approaches operate on a continuum; there are aspects of each approach that should be adopted.
• There needs to be ready access to information and education on the issues.
• There must be improved emergency response systems
• Community-based initiatives can mobilize private citizens to devise and implement solutions
• There needs to be a long-term common vision for how to address the issues, along with broad-based stakeholder involvement with creating and supporting the vision.
• The economic trends and models affecting coastal communities are changing. Planning and visioning must respond to fluid economic realities.
• Federal funding and incentives must be rethought and restructured.

There were no strong minority views expressed.