

Special

## A Rising Concern



By Mike Freeman / Newport Life

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Higher water levels are coming. How we respond could determine Newport County's future.

Although Narragansett Bay's water levels have been nudging up since at least the 1930s, when buoy gauges were installed in Providence and Newport, it wasn't enough to alarm many locals until recently. The rise has been steady, but slow, and not dramatic enough to trigger panic in the populace.

"It's come up about an inch every eight years since the buoys went in," says Billy Sweet, an oceanographer with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA). "About 10 inches overall."

While such creep was certainly noticed, it was more of a conversation topic — maybe a nuisance concern like the occasional knock in a car engine. Then came 2012's Superstorm Sandy, pushing local property owners and infrastructure managers to worry about both the big storms and the rising water that will worsen them.

"The water was up all around the building," says Ann Souder, Executive Director of the Seamen's Institute on Bowen's Wharf, recalling the days following Sandy. "I don't know the exact measurements, but it was enough for a kayak to paddle around. We had pumps running in the basement so didn't sustain serious damage."

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Despite that lack of catastrophe, people around the county have acted since. The 1938 hurricane, after all, is nearly out of living memory, but its generational trauma remains a bogeyman in Rhode Island’s collective consciousness, and the slow, upward creep of normal high tides makes that specter worse. Aided by 2014 University of Rhode Island (URI) Sea Grant money, the Seamen’s Institute made changes.

“We moved our archives from the basement to the main level,” Souder says, “and installed a transfer switch to run a generator to the basement pumps when the power goes out. They [URI] also recommended moving our mechanicals out of the basement, but we don’t have space for that.”

Souder isn’t alone. Pilings are being raised in harbors across the county, and discussions of how higher tides will exacerbate future storm surge are increasing.

Portsmouth’s Frank Carini, editor of ecoRI News, has seen awareness improve in the last 10 years, particularly in low-lying areas such as Newport’s The Point and Fifth Ward. Common Fence Point, the densely housed spit just before the Sakonnet Bridge in Portsmouth, is another worrisome spot.

“Rhode Island has done outreach well,” he says. “The Common Fence Preparedness Committee is a good example. Everyone there is at least aware now of what’s coming.”

How that translates, though, makes him less confident.

“Education isn’t worth much if it’s not acted on,” he says, noting that he fears what today’s kids will inherit.

Though not everyone shares Carini’s bleak outlook, even the most upbeat local voices sound jittery. If one thing sustains commerce, it’s the eternal sunshine of any economy’s collective sales force, with Realtors being among the most optimistic. Still, local agents are giving Narragansett Bay a restive side-eye.

Joyce Antoniello of Jamestown’s Island Realty concedes that it’s a problem. “Some buyers have raised concerns, particularly about insurance,” she says.

Matt Clarke, senior vice president at Middletown’s OceanPoint Insurance Agency, corroborates this. “We frequently discuss rising seas with clients and the impact that may eventually have on property values and the cost of flood insurance,” he says.

Though Paul Leys, a broker and co-owner at Newport’s Gustave White Sotheby’s, hasn’t seen sea levels impact the current real estate market, he’s concerned about what lies ahead. “Rising water is an issue now,” he says. “I wouldn’t say it’s necessarily negative presently, but it will be for future generations.”

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Sweet is unequivocal when it comes to carbon.

"Emissions matter," he says. "Less carbon output means less heating. Less heating means less water rise."

As a result, NOAA has created six scenarios calibrated to different hypothetical carbon levels, with the moderate scenario seeing Newport's tides rise 2–4 feet by 2100. ([Click here to for NOAA's Sea Level Rise Viewer](#))

"People already see it," says Sweet, echoing Brad Read. "The things they care about are getting wet."

If NOAA helps decision-makers understand rising seas by using data to predict the future, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) gives property owners, lenders and insurance brokers firm numbers by looking back.

"You can't create premiums based on what might happen," says Bob Desaulniers, a FEMA insurance specialist, explaining that flood insurance is set exclusively on information from the recent past, rather than any future projection. As such, FEMA periodically updates regional flood zone maps.

"We provide a snapshot effective back from the year the map is issued," Desaulniers says, noting that Newport County's last map came out in 2013.

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“A” is what Desaulniers calls “high-head” risk — homes vulnerable to 1 percent (or hundred-year) events, such as certain homes along Jamestown’s East Shore Road.

Numbers can be daunting. The average cost of flood insurance in Rhode Island is over \$1,400, more than double the national average. A property moved from the “A” to “V” zone can see its annual premium jump thousands of dollars.

When FEMA maps come out, homeowners, buyers, real estate agents and insurers chew their nails the way stock brokers might when sweating out a jobs report. “We certainly look at the maps,” says Joyce Antonello. “Newport County wasn’t as bad as places like Wickford or Matunuck, but things definitely changed last time.”

Even older people who have paid their mortgage and no longer require flood insurance are affected. With seas steadily rising, they now have to sell houses considered at-risk that previously weren’t.

“You see that,” says Desaulniers. “Boomers selling to millennials who will now require insurance because of rising water levels.”

Since so much is riding on its maps, FEMA is meticulous. “We walk 100 percent of the shoreline,” says Kerry Bogdan, a FEMA senior engineer. “We look at topography, erosion, vegetation – everything waves will interact with. If it’s vegetation, what kind? If it’s homes, how dense? Everything dissipates wave energy, but some things do it better. Salt marshes, for example, are preferable to sea walls.”

**Where do we go from here?** Will Thames Street’s tourist strip be able to hold in place, or will it be forced up to Spring or even Bellevue? Public infrastructure is especially vulnerable, including Newport’s wastewater treatment plant on JT Connell Highway and Easton’s Reservoir by First Beach. Sandy nearly breached Easton’s berm, making the city’s decision to reinforce the reservoir rather than relocate it and return the pond to salt marsh a fat target for hindsight criticism.

Even moderate forecasts put Jamestown’s infrastructure in jeopardy — something that town utility head Michael Gray understands. “By 2050, storms and high tides will be an increasing problem, and by 2100 there’ll be permanent impacts. Our sewer collection pipe on Conanicus Avenue is in trouble, along with the water plant on North Road.”

Both those roads are artificially above sea level in key places, and regular high tides currently lap North Road's shoulders, while Conanicus Avenue sees standing puddles from spray vaulting its seawall. Jamestown, in fact, could be cut in two should seas inundate the Mackerel Cove causeway. Little Compton's Sakonnet Point is in similar straits, and Newport's low-lying neighborhood woes are well-documented.

"No doubt about it," says Save The Bay's David Prescott, "towns will have hard decisions to make. We can't seawall the entire state."

**Brad Read is mixed on local reaction.** While he lauds the help he and others have received in refurbishing, he laments the lack of a unified vision. "It's like COVID," he says. "We're proactive, but in a scattered, reactive way."

Prescott's Save The Bay colleague Wenley Ferguson agrees. "There's no playbook for this," she says, "though since Sandy there's beginning to be one."

Ferguson has overseen small projects, replacing minor infrastructure with natural habitats — potential portents for bigger endeavors. "We replaced an old gas station at Tiverton's Grinnell's Beach with a surge-resilient dune and did a similar project at King Park in Newport," she says.

Save The Bay also restores salt marshes, something that excites Pam Rubinoff of URI's Sea Grant program. She headed the recent work at Seamen's Church, Sail Newport and the Newport Shipyard.

"Hard [human-made] and soft [natural] adaptations can't be separated," she says, "and there's more consideration now in integrating the two — though it's a tough issue. Solutions for each place will be like nested dolls, where decision-makers will prioritize economic and social issues alongside physical infrastructure concerns case by case."

**Looking forward,** Newport County won't need an ark. Even in worst-case scenarios, plenty of land will stay above future wrack lines. Change, though, is not only coming but underway, and will be significant even if seas crest in the moderate 2–4-foot range by century's end. If awareness is widespread, though, education alone (as Frank Carini points out) won't do it. And across the county, tough decisions need to be made far beyond the baby steps already taken.

[\*More from Newport Life\*](#)