

THE DAILY JOURNAL

The Peninsula's homepage

A wake-up call for San Mateo County

December 13, 2012, 05:00 AM By Gita Dev

By Gita Dev

New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania are going, hat in hand, to the federal government for close to \$100 billion to recover from Hurricane Sandy. However, only about 10 percent is for building new protections against future such events. The rest is for repairs and restoration of the homes and businesses back to where they were in their current vulnerable situation.

Does this make sense to us?

San Mateo County already has more property at risk from sea level rise than any other county in the entire state. According to the Pacific Institute's report, "The impacts of sea level rise of the California coast," we will face as much as \$26 billion in property damage; more than a quarter of the total damages expected in all of California from sea level rise. This amounts to more than \$35,000 per county resident. And we should remember, economists projected Sandy's cost would be in the millions ... but it was in the billions.

And these projections do not account for the personal tragedies, financial devastation, business losses and — let us not forget — loss of lives for the 110,000 San Mateo County residents who are at risk from inundation.

Why is San Mateo County so much at risk? Quite simply, we have been filling and developing into the Bay, paving over our natural shoreline buffers that used to protect our communities. The wetlands that once separated our cities from the Bay, absorbing water and reducing the waves, have largely been filled. In their place stand private homes, offices, airports, waste treatment plants and more.

There is a striking parallel to New Jersey, where residents have recently experienced the unfortunate consequences of the loss of their natural buffers. Many of the barrier islands and beaches that once protected the New Jersey coast now have buildings and roads where beaches and marshes once stood. Due to Hurricane Sandy, many of those houses are now flooded, countless roads are under water and the Jersey Shore's iconic rollercoaster sits broken in the sea.

For us in the Bay Area, hurricanes may not be at the forefront of our mind, but sea level rise certainly should be. In addition, earthquake action under the Bay could cause large waves, which would inundate shorelines.

The Bay Conservation and Development Commission's projected inundation zone for San Mateo County includes the entire city of Foster City, almost all of Redwood Shores, the San Francisco International Airport, Highway 101, both the San Mateo-Hayward and Dumbarton bridges and numerous neighborhoods and critical infrastructure up and down the county. Recently, the U.S. Army Corps of

Engineers started using new sea level rise data based on more current research findings that shows sea levels rising faster than earlier projected.

Yet, despite the enormous cost taxpayers are already saddled with given San Mateo County's existing vulnerability, developers continue to propose new projects that will put even more residents at risk.

The most audacious is the current push by Cargill and developer DMB to develop the below-sea-level salt ponds in Redwood City with thousands of new homes. Not only would this unnecessarily put tens of thousands more people at risk, below sea level, but it will also cost us taxpayers billions when we have to bail them out.

It's time to get smarter about where we build. We need to restore the edge of the Bay to natural wetlands to buffer our communities from sea level rise and waves, rather than constantly filling it in for new development.

Let Hurricane Sandy be our last wake-up call.

Gita Dev is an architect who currently volunteers on the Sustainable Land Use Committee of the Sierra Club's local chapter and advocates for sustainable growth on the Peninsula. She has served as chair for the National Housing Committee for the American Institute of Architects.

http://www.smdailyjournal.com/article_preview.php?id=1759778&title=A%20wake-up%20call%20for%20San%20Mateo%20County