

Orlando Sentinel

OPINION PRESSREADER

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SUN SENTINEL EDITORIAL

Lessons from Hurricane Ian that Florida must heed

Every time a major hurricane approaches landfall in Florida, one question dominates most people's minds, no matter how much outward bravado they may show.

Is this the big one? By that, they usually mean "Will this storm be the storm so massive, so costly, so deadly that it forces Florida to change the way it responds to God, climate change and extreme weather? Will this finally force us to fix our eternally precarious insurance market?"

The ravaged communities of Fort Myers, Venice and Cape Coral can't say they dodged anything. As of Friday afternoon, 21 people were dead, most of them in these southwest Florida communities. Yet even as rescuers searched for survivors of Hurricane Ian, Floridians in other parts of the state were talking about how much worse it would have been if it had hit Tampa. Floodwaters were still rising in Orange, Ocoee and Seminole counties, but Orlando residents seemed focused on the fact that the storm shifted south instead of ripping through downtown like a buzzsaw.

It's an ongoing pattern of desensitization, one that fails to realize how many "big ones" have slammed into this state in recent years. Floridians have taken in shocking images — ambulances waiting for bodies of senior citizens who died in the sweltering heat of a Hollywood nursing home after Hurricane Irma's 2017 power failure, the street grids littered with smashed debris after Hurricane Michael flattened the Pinahand resort of Mexico Beach a year later. They watched the approach of Dorian, a massive Category 5 storm that in 2019 threatened to wipe Daytona Beach off the map only to stall out over the Bahamas. All of this, and much more, within the last five years alone.

For southwest Florida, Ian is the big one. Recovery will be measured in years, not months. The storm will reshape the character of southwest Florida, including the charming and irreplaceable resort islands of Sanibel and Captiva. Gov. Ron DeSantis has performed ably so far, staying in constant contact with local officials, talking with President Joe Biden and appearing on TV regularly to communicate with Floridians. But he is re-elected, the single largest challenge of



Rescue personnel search a flooded trailer park after Hurricane Ian passed by the area in Fort Myers on Thursday. STEVE HELBER/AP

his second term will be to steer that recovery — and put his muscle behind a more comprehensive defense against fiscal and meteorological devastation.

Insurance, from the ground up

Florida's private property insurance market is fundamentally broken and needs a comprehensive reboot. There is no pretense of a free market here; state regulations have companies so bound up, there's almost no room for innovation. But the ties are made of gilded rope, designed to maximize profit potential while maintaining legal fictions (such as the law that allows companies to trade on national brand recognition but minimize their risk by walling Florida off into separate companies). Add to that the billions of dollars of backup catastrophic funding — taxpayer-backed "reinsurance" that lowers companies' exposure to large-scale emergencies. Meanwhile, lawmakers tried to balance the scales with laws that were originally intended to force quick, consumer-friendly results to legitimate claims. As crafted by trial-attorney lobbyists, however, these measures created safe havens for myriads of claims, which have now become so prevalent

that several small insurance companies have collapsed. It's a mess too tangled to repair. Florida lawmakers need to rebuild the system from the ground up.

Fight climate inaction

At the same time, the governor must confront his own party's persistent blindness toward the reality of climate science, which sharply limits Florida's ability to manage the risk of impacts of future big storms. Researchers have already estimated that climate change added at least 10% to Ian's rainfall totals; this gives the governor real-life examples of how much less devastation southwest Florida might have seen. If anyone can do it, he can. DeSantis has never really been a climate-change denier and has, in fact, kept the challenges of resilience and related water-quality issues in an awkward side bag he's signed off on hundreds of millions in allocations, including projects to restore marshes and wetlands that should be buffering the state against the violence of big storms.

At the same time, however, his activist battle on all things "woke" includes a frontal attack on companies that embrace the ideals (and economic benefits) of clean, renewable energy.

He should drop that nonsense and become the climate warrior he's always promised to be, rebuilding those across the political

spectrum who have learned to talk big on climate while stalling on action that might offend their allies in the fossil-fuel industries. Florida has big questions to answer, including whether it makes sense to keep crowding residents into the coastal areas that we already know are most vulnerable to the ravages of climate change, and forcing state taxpayers to foot the bill for endless cycles of devastation and recovery.

As cities like Fort Myers and Cape Coral begin the painful process of rebuilding, DeSantis should demand standards that respect reality. Around the world, weather is becoming increasingly violent and unpredictable, with bigger, more destructive storms and increased vulnerability to high heat and other perils. He should also force the acknowledgment that as sea levels rise, flooding will emerge as the No. 1 threat to lives and property in Florida. Any reconstruction along the coast must consider the inevitability that sooner or later, the invading sea will prevail.

It's not just coastal areas. In every inland county Ian passed over, flooding threatened homes and washed out roads. Florida has to stop paving over the areas that allow water to seep back into the ground (where it eventually becomes the state's critical drinking-water supply). State leaders should also recognize the need to minimize the state's contribution to global warming by reducing reliance on fossil fuels.

The good fight

Even for those still awaiting the mythical monster of the "big one," there's no longer any excuse to avoid the reality playing out in Southwest Florida: Over the course of 24 hours, the lives of hundreds of thousands of Floridians were dramatically remade by Hurricane Ian, and recovery will take generations. This will keep happening, and it's time to acknowledge that reality.

If DeSantis wants a culture war, this is the rightest of choices.

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GUEST COLUMNIST

Ian shows importance of risk management

My wife was scheduled to attend a professional meeting in Savannah, Ga., last week, and we spent time analyzing her options. As a data scientist with expertise in risk management and decision-making under uncertainty, tracking hurricanes is a hobby. My assessment: cancel the meeting and move it online.



By Sheldon Jacobson

The organizing committee eventually came to their senses and heeded my advice, albeit on late Monday afternoon, and moved the meeting virtual. Smart decision.

The problem was not getting people to the meeting. The issue was getting everyone safely home.

Welcome to hurricane season 2022, with Ian the first major hurricane to hit the mainland United States this season.

The nation has become adept in preparing for such events, to minimize loss of life and property. Evacuation orders were issued, usually in plenty of time, and Gov. Ron DeSantis issued a state of emergency. Cruise lines repositioned their ships to avoid the storm, and airlines adjusted their schedules into and around the storm areas. The degree to which hub airports like Atlanta and Charlotte are affected over the weekend remain open questions, with such effects certain to percolate across the nation's entire air system.

There was a time when people would ride out a storm. Some felt that they wanted to protect their home and assets, stocked with ample food, water, and flashlights to get through the ordeal. For those less prepared and skilled, the net result was people overwhelmed by flood waters and winds that made them vulnerable to injury and in some cases, death. They also placed rescue crews at risk when they were called upon to help stranded people.

Why such massive mobilization and preparation when a large hurricane hits high population areas? Risk management.

Hurricane tracking has become more reliable over the years, with better computer models available through unexpected twists and turns always occur. What is also better understood is the impact of hurricane level winds and rains, so there is far less uncertainty about their potential for damage and destruction. Florida building codes have improved

over the past several decades so that areas vulnerable to hurricanes, like South Florida, have infrastructures that are better situated to weather such storms. Tampa Bay construction also follows state-wide building codes, even though the area has not seen a major hurricane for over a century. Their infrastructure will be tested over the next two days.

Risk management guides actions that maximize benefits while minimizing damage. The most important assets are lives, followed by property.

It is far safer for people to move to areas that are inland, as hurricane winds weaken over land. Emergency exit routes are well defined and marked, though traffic is heavy and gasoline supplies may be strained.

Risk management does not mean that every action taken will be the correct one. Occasionally, evacuations in some areas prove to have been unnecessary. Social media is prone to amplify any such errors, when the right call produces suboptimal results.

This does not devalue the benefits of risk management. What it does reveal the uncertainty of weather events and how difficult it can be to make precise forecasts about a highly imprecise event.

That is why meteorology, the science of the atmosphere, focuses on weather forecasting, not weather prediction. Likelihoods of weather events are nothing more than probabilities or the chance of something occurring.

A 90% chance of rain means that 10% of an area may not get any precipitation. That does not diminish the forecast, but rather, indicates how hard it is to be precise when it comes to weather.

Ian, like every hurricane, has been a case study in risk management. Following proven methods to reduce risk to people and property means that in its aftermath, recovery will be swifter. Lessons learned may also help preparing for the next hurricane that is certain to arrive this season.

Sheldon Jacobson is a computer science professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His specialty is data science, risk assessment and decision-making under uncertainty.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Come together in good times and bad

Once again, my heart is warmed as I listen to accounts of neighbors, as well as the Cajun Navy, rescuing people affected by Hurricane Ian.

When a crisis occurs, no questions are asked. Only the life of another human being matters.

We see it everywhere after this particular tragedy. Let's remember other tragedies that happened in our country and how people came running to help.

Focus on this good part of our human nature and let's try to come together in the future and not only when a tragedy occurs.

Joe Peeler Mount Dora

Overdevelopment breeds flooding

Watching the constant news reports of the storm, I kept hearing meteorologists comment on the flooding: "Worse than ever before." Several neighborhoods in Orange County are known to have flooding issues, so it was expected there. I heard one man say he had lived in his home for 44 years and never had flooding problems. Well, what do you expect? Hundreds of thousands more residents, thousands of acres of land paved over for roads, sidewalks, patios, pools, slabs for hours, shopping centers and apartments. The water has no place to go anymore! And, with global warming, we need to

expect flooding to get worse. Get used to it or move to higher ground.

Lynne Hill Cocoa

News reflects our divisions

One no longer wants to listen to news channels because there is no news. No one cares about the state of one's city, state, or nation, for there is no way of knowing what is really true or not.

The facts of life today are ignored; high cost inflation, recession, decreasing availability of virtually everything, and ever-creeping loss of personal freedoms and liberties. The prognosis for children and grandchildren is misery stacked on top of more misery, as the government burdens each and every person with increasing debt. Nothing is what it seems, everything is a lie, and no one keeps their word!

When a nation no longer has any honor or moral character, that nation is doomed to failure and decline. Decline it certainly has. I believe a majority of the population rates the direction we are in, as wrong! The crowning point is that those elites in charge of everything seem not to care one iota.

The phrase we all grew up with associated with just about everything evil (Russia), "Rhe means justify the end," are now the modus operandi, as all that once was cherished is torn asunder. If once was great, but sadly we watch it crumble before us, slowly but surely. Bob Kring Longwood

SOMETHING ON YOUR MIND?

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