

“The Sea’s Power and Foolish Policies”

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“If Mother Nature cooperates, the fourth of July weekend is a perfect time to be at the Delaware beaches. Just watching the waves gives an onlooker a small hint of the power of the ocean. Again, if Mother Nature cooperates, the waves will be small and Delawareans and visitors, young and old, can enjoy the sand and the surf.

However, Mother Nature does not always cooperate. As we know from recent history, powerful storms can come churning up the coastline, sucking away sand from the beaches and crashing waves on structures close to the water.

In 2011, Hurricane Irene banged into the East Coast. Hurricane Sandy followed in 2012, at first threatening a direct hit on Delaware, then swerving and smashing into New Jersey and New York. Irene cost 15.8 billion dollars, while Sandy cost 128 billion dollars. This review is not to frighten beachgoers, nor is it to argue that we should take climate change seriously, although that would be a good idea.

No, the review is to remind us how close we are to that powerful sea. Swimmers and splashers are not the problem. The buildings and communities built so close to the beach are. Rebuilding them was what was so expensive about Irene and Sandy. That money comes from taxpayers who probably never even stayed in one of those beachfront properties.

Guess what. They will be paying for the next cleanup as well.

The paradox is that taxpayers are subsidizing people to live the good life near a rising sea. Forget the environmental arguments against this. Just consider the waste of tax money.

The support comes in the form of federally subsidized flood insurance, as well as federal rebuilding efforts and federal funding for roads, sewer lines and other infrastructure.

Is it good for local business? Certainly. But only a limited few benefit from it. There are other, more reasonable ways of enjoying the beaches.

First, do not build so close to the sea. Second, make those who build in those areas pay their own way. Slowly reduce the flood insurance subsidies, develop a policy of not rebuilding again and again.

In 1982, Congress passed the Coastal Barrier Resources Act of 1982. It saved millions of acres of shoreline from development simply by withholding those federal subsidies.

These preserved areas are important because they are the first line of defense against the storms. Those wetlands and dunes absorb the power of the major storms. Development destroys these barriers. Just look at what happened to the New Orleans region with Hurricane Katrina. Development over decades destroyed the natural defenses.

If you are at the beach, take a moment to consider the power of the sea. Then ask why we are being so foolish.”