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## Robert Verchick guest column: Time for communities to face climate change



Robert Verchick

BY ROBERT VERCHICK

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With attitudes ranging from informed urgency to nonchalance, we on the Gulf Coast are staring down the barrel of climate change. In Louisiana, we're losing acres of land a day to sea level rise and other impacts of climate change, all of which makes New Orleans and other communities in the state even more vulnerable to Katrina-like storms, the severity of which is closely tied to global warming.

In addition to reducing carbon emissions – a must if we have any hope of avoiding catastrophic harm – we need to prepare for the impacts we're too late to stop. In the coming decades, that will mean some large-scale projects like

fortifying levees, replenishing sand dunes, resuscitating coastal wetlands and more.

Even without climate change, much of our natural and artificial infrastructure is on the ropes. Bridges and roads crumble as we drive on them. Aging water systems leach toxins into our pipes. Highways and causeways routinely flood.

Like homeowners who ignore brown spots on their ceiling until the roof caves in, many politicians resist spending money on such things until they reach crisis stage. When we eventually do get around to rebuilding and making repairs, we'll need to be sure that we're allowing for the effects of climate change. Bridges, for instance, will need to account for where the water will be in 20 years, not just for where it is now. Water treatment plants may have to be reconfigured or built on pilings lest a 500-year flood plain be transformed (because of harder rains) into a 100-year flood plain.

An often overlooked aspect of such preparation has to do with what can be done at the individual and community level. Such smaller-scale measures, broadly employed, can significantly reduce the risk of rising seas and souped-up storms, even in a precarious region like ours.

Such measures include elevating homes and other flood-proofing measures, as well as voluntary buy-out programs for specific properties at particular risk. In addition, planners need to examine building codes to make sure new construction is safe from flooding.

Another key is comprehensive disaster planning, a lesson hard-learned during Katrina. By planning for the next inevitable crisis, communities can identify important risks and develop methods to respond when the time comes. Similarly, disaster planning also should include communications strategies so vulnerable communities won't be left in the dark as disaster response unfolds.

At the heart of these "nonstructural" adaptation efforts must be a commitment to genuine community involvement in the development and implementation of plans. Federal agencies have a role in disaster response, to be sure, but the people who live in a community have insights into the particular risks that are lost on federal planners. Plus, residents know better than anyone else the cultural importance of the Gulf to their way of life. All of that has to be baked into the plan.

These kinds of nonstructural approaches to climate risk are the topic of a forum Friday morning hosted by Loyola University's Center for Environmental Law. We hope the conversation that ensues will help launch a broader discussion about preparing for climate impacts across the region. While we work to avoid the risks we can't manage, we must responsibly manage the risks we can't avoid.

Robert Verchick holds the Gauthier-St. Martin chairmanship in environmental law at Loyola University in New Orleans.

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