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“In Harm’s Way”

BY NANCY SOLOMON

As part of the exhibit “In Harm’s Way,” which explores how communities cope with storms and hurricanes, I conducted numerous interviews with local residents, architects, and planners about their experiences with storms and hurricanes. One of those interviewed was the Town of Hempstead Commissioner of Conservation and Waterways, Tom Doheny, who has worked on erosion issues for over 40 years. In addition, architects Joe Pignataro of Freeport and Joe Gallinaro of Long Beach have important insights into the problems facing waterfront homeowners.

Tom Doheny: “The severe storms of the ‘60s and the ‘70s snapped us to attention. Because there was no dune, and therefore, everyone had a good look at the ocean. We started building dunes in the early 1970s, installing snow fencing and planting beach grass. I went to a Long Beach Civic Association meeting and when I explained about the dunes, they just about tarred and feathered me. Hurricane Gloria showed up and completely wiped out the west end of Long Beach. Their TVs and furniture were floating down Ohio Avenue. The City Manager’s phone line lit up, and the people demanded a dune be built for the west end of Long Beach. A month and a half later, it was completed. We were able to decrease the damage to a great degree.”

When Sandy hit, Doheny, like others, was surprised at the damage on the bay front: “Had I known we were going to have an 11-foot tsunami, coming down Reynolds Channel, I would have done a lot more personally to protect my own property. The forecasters kept equating it to Irene, saying ‘it would only be a foot or two over, don’t worry.’ But that was not the case. The tide from the East Rockaway Inlet and the tide from Jones Inlet came together, and sandwiched the people in Island Park. They didn’t have a chance.”

Like many coastal planners, Commissioner Doheny had seen a wide variety of proposals to prevent future storm damage on Long Island. Although there are some who would like to see floodgates erected, there are factors that could affect the success of such proposals.

“I’m still asking myself what a flood wall would do. When there’s no place for the water



Point Lookout 2015: Shoreline communities like Point Lookout on Long Island’s South Shore suffered catastrophic damage during Sandy. Photo by Nancy Solomon, courtesy of Long Island Traditions.

to go, it will take the path of least resistance. It’s just going to shunt the water further west. The water will just pile up on it [the wall.] It’s a massive 15-foot wall of steel and concrete that is made to protect infrastructure. They don’t really care if the water goes someplace else. I hope the state is going to do some studies on the hydraulics. The mayor of Freeport wants to put tidal gates in the inlet. The volume of water that comes in the inlet is enormous. I can’t tell you how many millions of gallons of water come in there a day—600,000 cubic yards of sand come in there on the littoral drift every year. A study needs to be done to determine what will happen when the tidal gates holds the water back, from coming into the embayment, as to where the water will go in response to the tide gate.”

Alongside people like Commissioner Doheny are architects like Joe Pignataro of Freeport, who experienced Sandy and also have to cope with the new reality of climate change.

“A house has to be designed well, but just as important, has to be built well. We’re being more sensitive to how these houses are going to be fastened, and how they’re going to be constructed and secured. There’s a big rush to elevate the houses, and I think we’re getting ahead of ourselves. We’re creating skyscrapers of houses just to get them off the ground.

There are other proven ways to mitigate a house to make it flood resistant, such as buoyant foundations or flood break walls that rise against the house as the floodwaters rise. These designs allow the house elevations to remain as-is. You have other issues, too, when you elevate. You may be out of the flood zone, but now you’re higher in the wind zone. You also have to think of the marketability of these houses—who is going to want to climb 13+ steps to get to their front door? We have to be sensitive to the community.”

Pignataro helped redesign a bay house and has some astute observations about its design:

“The bay houses have these trap doors in the floor, and they let the water come in. When the water rises, the trap door opens, the water comes in, and six hours later, the water goes down. The interior will get wet, but if you live in a coastal area, you have to make a few concessions to how you design your interiors. A lot of houses around here were condemned, because they shifted on their foundations, where there was so much water pressure on the sides of the houses, it actually caved in their foundations. Had they had flood vents that let the water in and out, most likely their foundations would have remained intact. Older houses that have used spray foam fiberglass insulation within



115 Connecticut Avenue: Architect Joe Gallinaro has rebuilt several houses in Long Beach, where there are houses on both the ocean and the bay. Photo by Nancy Solomon, courtesy of Long Island Traditions.

their floor joist cavities after Sandy could possibly float off their foundations the next time such a storm occurs. Those are the things people need to be concerned about.”

Architect Joseph Gallinaro of Long Beach has worked on countless projects since Sandy struck:

“We stayed during the storm. Unfortunately, our block had multiple house fires. The flames were reflecting off the 36-inch deep floodwater, making the street look like it was on fire. A very surreal experience.”

“After the storm, the potential for how I could help surfaced right away. In a single day, I could be at a friend’s or neighbor’s house giving them a list of individuals that could help them, gutting houses or drawing with a black marker on some wall, showing owners how to deal with this forced renovation project. It has felt good to help my community. My children are the fourth generation of Gallinaro’s to live in Long Beach.”

“We’ve been developing multiple foundation systems and ways of laying out houses. The homeowner’s connection to the yard is completely different once elevated a full story. We

sometimes bring the yard up to the height of the second story or main living area with a large deck, or extend the exterior yard space under a house on stilts for kids to play on.

We ask people, ‘How do you live?’ so that the house design reflects their lifestyle. It’s not enough to make the houses safe—we need to do more. Designing a house that can withstand strong winds and flood waters is not enough. We have to positively affect the way people live in their homes. We try to give people something they don’t even know they want.”

For those interested in hearing more about these topics, I invite you to visit the Long Island Traditions’ YouTube channel, and look for the “In Harm’s Way” playlist. www.youtube.com/user/LongIslandTraditions

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In Memoriam: Gregory Sharrow (1950–2018) Folklorist, Vermont Folklife Center

“We believe strongly as an organization and as individuals that art does not belong to any particular sector of the population—to rich people or to people with university training or to people who have public acclaim—but rather that the making of art is an irrepressible force that is true of everyone.”
—Greg Sharrow

“If we are really wanting to understand someone’s experience we need to know what they believe. Because people exist within a system of belief that has to do with health and wellness and illness and healing, it has to do with justice and fairness and all kinds of really fundamental and important things. Folklore is the perfect postmodern discipline. Because truth from my point of view is a chorus. It’s a chorus of 10 people, or a chorus of a thousand people, where some people are singing in unison, some people are singing in harmony, and some people are singing in disharmony.”
—Greg Sharrow

Quoted from “In Memoriam: Gregory Lew Sharrow (March 26, 1950—April 2, 2018)” Vermont Folklife Center, Middlebury, Vermont. For the entire post, go to <https://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/fieldnotes/in-memoriam-gregory-sharrow>

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