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## Sarasota County prepares strategies to stem effects of sea level rise



Manasota Key Road damaged by Hurricane Idalia (WWSB)

By Jim DeLa

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Residents in Sarasota County will have a chance this year to weigh in on proposals to address sea level rise and the growing problem of persistent coastal flooding, county officials say.

The county, with the help of consultants, has been looking at data on the subject, said Sara Kane, sustainability and resilience manager for Sarasota County, working with the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. The work will produce a flooding-vulnerability assessment for the county, a sort of road map for policy makers to follow in the years ahead when making decisions on public-works projects and more.

"We're looking at all of our assets to see how they're being affected by sea level rise and flooding," Kane said. "And then we're actually going to take that analysis and come up with a list of projects ... that will make our community more sustainable and resilient."

Kane estimates that results of their analysis and suggested projects will be ready for public input perhaps as early as June. "We hope to have some public meetings to talk about the results of the study."



Kane says projects could include stormwater management, green infrastructure projects, planting trees, "doing living shorelines or coastal habitat restoration projects that could reduce flooding and also improve water quality at the same time."

This analysis is part of a statewide effort, through grants from Resilient Florida, to fight the effects of climate change. Resilient SRQ received \$201.5 million in federal block grant funding as part of the program.

"Our entire state is preparing for that, and rightfully so," Kane said. "We have the most coastal areas out of any state. So, this is a big problem for Florida in general and especially the coastal areas."

Beach renourishment, one of the more visible tools in the county's arsenal to fight nature's adverse effects on the coastline, would not meet the grant criteria to receive funding from Resilient Florida.

Rachel Herman, the county's environmental protection division manager, said while the primary benefits of beach renourishment are recreational, the practice does have environmental benefits. "Upland structures and infrastructure will be better protected from storm damage," she said. "A wide, nourished beach system absorbs wave energy, protects upland areas from flooding, and mitigates erosion."

Last spring, 92,000 cubic yards of sand were trucked in and deposited onto Siesta Key Beach to repair erosion caused by Hurricane Hermine in 2016. The \$8.2 million for the project was funded with state and federal grants along with funds collected by Sarasota County's Tourist Development Tax Beach Renourishment fund.

In 2021, 700,000 cubic yards of sand was pumped onto Lido Beach at a cost of \$12.6 million. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers paid for more than 60% of the project. The rest of the funds came from the state and the City of Sarasota's Tourist Development Tax.



The Corps has an agreement with the city to renourish Lido Key every five years for the next 50 years.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration says sea level along United States coastlines is projected to rise by nine to 11 inches by 2050, resulting in damaging floods 10 times more often than now.

Dr. David Tomasko, the executive director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program, says local measurements are bearing these predictions out. Thirty years ago, he said, experts estimated a sea level rise of two millimeters per year, or less than an inch a decade. "The St. Pete gauge site has shown six inches over the last 20 years," he noted. "So it appears that you know, a two-millimeter-per-year [rate] is like maybe a third of what we're seeing locally."

By 2050, he says, "we expect that our average water level will be what today's high tide is," he said. "And high tide will be nine inches stacked on top of that."

And storms are not even needed for parts of the Suncoast to go underwater. Tomasko says so-called "blue sky" flooding is a regular occurrence.

"Parts of Longboat Key Village see ... flooding twice a month," he said. "When you have a full moon or a new moon, your high tides are higher, those are called spring tides. Spring tides have nothing to do with the time of the year, it's time of the month. And so we're seeing the streets flooding twice a month. And not just like for a couple hours, but for a couple of days."

Tomasko says the changes won't always be dramatic, such a seawall breaches.

"What we're anticipating seeing is more of our storm drains will not be able to drain rainfall when it rains on a high tide," he said. That is already happening in some neighborhoods, "along parts of Bradenton, along the Manatee River, parts of Gulfport, parts of Tarpon Springs. We're already seeing that happening right now," he said. "It's just going to get worse."

*Jim DeLa is a reporter for the Community News Collaborative. Reach him at [jdela@cncfl.org](mailto:jdela@cncfl.org).*

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