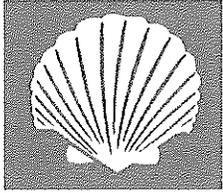


SOUTH
COUNTY



TOURISM
COUNCIL

February 18, 2014

Study Commission on Economic Impact of Sea Level Rise
Study Commission on Tourism
C/O Chairwoman Representative Lauren Carson
State House Room 101
Providence, Rhode Island 02816

Dear Committee Members:

Charlestown

Representing the tourism economy in southern Rhode Island for more than a decade, frames my perspective and the commentary that follows regarding both tourism and sea level rise.

Coventry

East Greenwich

It has been said, many coastal communities decide – by action or inaction – what kind of experience they offer residents and visitors. If you went to a state beach this summer, did you spend your off beach hours walking or biking on quiet lanes past charming houses, weathered gray from the salt sea air? Or were you stuck in lanes of traffic waiting to make a left turn into the sun-blasted asphalt expanse of a shopping center just like the one you left back home?

Exeter

Hopkinton

Narragansett

North Kingstown

Throughout much of our country's coastline we have illustrations of extreme examples from sprawling hodgepodge of New Jersey to the still quiet charm of Rhode Island. Acres of parking lots surround shopping centers and outlets and real estate offices and stores selling T-shirts, coolers, kites, and seashells labeled "Made in China."

Richmond

South Kingstown

We know when sprawl advances, charm retreats. Population growth is part of it. In 1902, when the pricey new automobile began taking the well-to-do to the beaches, the U.S. had 80 million people. Now, the same beaches must cope with a mobile population that's pushing 300 million.

West Greenwich

Westerly

As a result, visitors do avoid spending money in ugly places. Beach cottages in cookie cutter subdivisions are out. No harsh light will cast a visitor's shadow for long. Those who care about their locale will be the only people getting visitor's business.

Coastal communities can choose how they respond. Ugly sprawl will happen unless we plan and zone for alternatives.

South County has a unique sense of place. Those who visit us enjoy our simple pleasures – going to the beach, walking, biking or kayaking or just sitting on the porch at a community gathering spot and talking with people. Learning about the history of a place brings added charm and value.

If we value our moonlit walks on the beach we will guard against over lit businesses and unshielded floodlights that block starlight with electric sky glow. After all, we are the stewards of this very unique place – South County – that we call home.

Sea level rise, storm surge and erosion rates are well known to those with fond memories of their family throwing a blanket down on the beach and staking a beach umbrella in the sand as we lolled about at our favorite beach. The water now rises 50 feet or more beyond that staked umbrella spot, allowing no room to place a blanket because the beach at high or low tide is no longer there. The vulnerability to our coastal communities has grown over that same time.

Science has taught us much during the past decades accompanied by technology advancing knowledge exponentially. Citizens and elected officials must squarely face the realities these advances have taught. We must create a longer vision beyond the next election cycle.

Risks to coastal communities' increase in several ways: loss of beaches for recreational use and the associated loss of revenues they generate. The loss of private property and the associated tax revenue they generate. Loss of significant impacts to infrastructure and the accompanying costs of greater capital maintenance and improvements.

One of the most frightening aspects of sea level rise is the intrusion of salt water into our groundwater drinking wells. Many realize potable water will become in the near future one of our most precious commodities.

As coastal communities become more vulnerable to storm and sea level rise, the resulting impact to state and local communities will be an increased percentage of their cost share.

I would suggest legislation creating a dedicated fund for beach replenishment. I believe a dedicated Coastal Resiliency Fund is something that Rhode Island must make happen, now. This fund would be dedicated to beach replenishment, dune and salt marsh restoration or enhancement, and buy outs of vulnerable coastal properties. The real estate transfer tax, or fossil fuel tax may be an appropriate funding stream for the Rhode Island Coastal Resiliency Fund.

Massachusetts created their National Seashore in 1961. Rhode Island is late. Let us begin now.

Tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place – its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage and the well-being of its residents – will become in future years the only sustainable economy.

Respectfully submitted,



Myrna C. George,
President/CEO South County Tourism Council