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New Jersey: Garden State or flooded state?

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By Michele Byers

If New Jersey is the Garden State, our garden is watered by plentiful rivers, springs, streams and creeks flowing from corner to corner. Many waterways are out of sight and out of mind until they overflow their banks, as they did during Hurricane Irene and subsequent storms.

Given the cost in dollars and human suffering, there's no question we must act to prevent future flooding. So what can we do?

How about starting with the causes of the problem ... and it's safe to say sprawl development is a big one.

First and foremost, flooding is a legacy of too much pavement, concrete, parking lots and rooftops. When land is paved or compacted, it can't absorb water. Rainwater from storms, or stormwater, runs into rivers and streams, which ultimately overflow their banks and flood homes, neighborhoods, towns and cities. The more pavement and rooftops, known as "impervious cover," there are, the more stormwater — and the more flooding.

Second, compounding the problem, we have a history of building — and rebuilding — in the wrong places: flood plains, wetlands, wetlands buffers and the edges of waterways. A current example is a new auto parts store under construction 20 feet from the bank of the Passaic River in Paterson, a spot so flood-prone that news reporters routinely head over there every time it floods. And there's already an auto parts store across the street!

Third, our human reaction is to continually rebuild our homes and businesses in floodplains and wetlands after each storm. After all, they are our homes. This is understandable but not sustainable.

Fourth, the way we manage stormwater runoff is outdated and ineffective. For example, stormwater structures recently installed in the tiny Rose Brook watershed in Hunterdon County have turned the brook into a highly erosive stream that's impacting the Delaware and Raritan Canal water supply, dropping wetland water tables and possibly drying up wells.

What would it take to truly solve New Jersey's flood problem?

First — preserve, preserve, preserve! Preserved open space — forests in particular — plays a critical role in flood prevention. Forests, wetlands and other natural lands perform many “ecological services,” including flood control. Plants, trees and soil catch and hold rainwater, slowly releasing it into groundwater and rivers and preventing volumes of raging waters from racing downstream.

Continued open space funding with a buyout component for repeatedly flooded properties, “Blue Acres” is a must! Although expensive in the short run, this solution is the only one guaranteed to stop property damage in flood plains. It is much more cost-effective than pouring our money into rebuilding homes and buildings that will only flood again and again.

Keep our environmental protections in place. Our state has made great strides in the past 30 years — protecting freshwater wetlands and buffers, preserving significant forests and stream corridors, and keeping new development out of wetlands and flood plains. These programs must be maintained and strengthened, not relaxed in the name of jobs and the economy. Because watersheds cross political boundaries, strong regional planning and land-use controls — like those in the Highlands and Pinelands — are critical to the future of our state.

Restore, restore, restore! We should take every opportunity to restore wetlands and floodplains back to their natural state. That will be our best bet, providing flood control at a much reduced cost.

It’s important to note that, thanks to a very wet August, the ground was already fully saturated before Hurricane Irene blew through. Some have speculated that the ground acted just like pavement, a disturbing preview of future floods if we don’t change our development habits.

No one solution will fix all of New Jersey’s flooding problems. But if we listen to what our land is telling us and work with its natural flood-control processes, we will stand the best chance of preventing flooding. That’s far better than fighting with powerful Mother Nature!

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