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## Shore growth, flooding expected to increase

*By Kirk Moore  
and Todd B. Bates*

The Jersey Shore area can expect growth *and* more flooding in the not-so-distant future, experts say.

It's a hazardous mix that can lead to increased property damage and stormwater pollution, harming ecological and economic gems such as Barnegat Bay, barrier islands and other vulnerable environs.

"People are now going to have to pay ... more attention to where we build and where we don't build," said Peter Kasabach, executive director of New Jersey Future, a nonprofit that focuses on smart growth and sustainable development.

"We know that we should be careful about that, but until the floods start causing real damage, we don't take it seriously," he said.

This year's onslaught of storms and floods put residents and officials on notice that they'd better plan for more of the same. At the same time, New Jersey appears poised to promote more development, including in vulnerable and environmentally sensitive areas in the Shore area, according to observers.

Monmouth County is projected to have 685,200 residents in 2023, up nearly 55,000 from last year, according to state and Census figures. Ocean County's population is projected to hit 661,800, up about 85,000.

Tropical Storm Irene rang one of several meteorological alarm bells this year, causing widespread flooding in many inland and shore areas. The remnants of Tropical Storm Lee and state record precipitation this year also resulted in flooding.

The storms caused hundreds of millions of dollars in damages, left hundreds of thousands without power for days and closed some shellfish beds for weeks as a result of polluted runoff.

Tony MacDonald, director of the Urban Coast Institute at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, said Irene made coastal and other New Jersey residents aware of the need to avoid building in flood plains and protect against storms.

Still, "I think we will probably continue to overdevelop in some of the near-shore areas and barrier islands, particularly Ocean County," he said.

He said he thinks the Christie Administration's draft State Strategic Plan "could play a very positive role, so it's up to the coastal communities to sort of step up to that" and not build in flood plains and buffer areas, he said.

The administration's promise to begin restoring Barnegat Bay is not coming at the expense of its other avowed goal — making New Jersey a friendlier place to do business, and encouraging new development when the economy recovers.

Environmental groups complained about the November adoption of the draft State Strategic Plan that aims to steer future growth into existing communities — a vaguely defined concept that Jeff Tittel of the Sierra Club said could “dismantle” planning by the state Pinelands and Highlands commissions.

The real-world impact of the state plan can be exaggerated, said John Weingart, assistant director of the Eagleton Institute for Politics at Rutgers University, and a former state environmental official with long experience in land use.

“Land use in this state is controlled by laws and regulations, and the state plan has never really pre-empted any of those,” Weingart said. Specific development plans still get approved or denied on the basis of those rules, he said.

The strategic plan shows how New Jersey has gone from trying to control rampant sprawl, to seeking the most effective way to get some growth and new jobs, said Joseph J. Seneca, an economist and university professor at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Public Policy at Rutgers.

“The plan identifies areas where growth should occur,” Seneca said.

With housing prices in a fall since 2007, there's no sign of a return to building massive subdivisions on the suburban fringes, he said. “Natural market forces” now are focusing builders toward redevelopment in existing suburban and urban areas.

Carleton Montgomery of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, an environmental group that closely monitors state policies on the nearly million-acre region, said “we don't know yet what the plan would mean for the Pinelands and the Highlands.”

“The Pinelands plan already allows development in Pinelands villages, including sewer plants. There is a hard growth boundary that would require an amendment (by the Pinelands Commission) to change,” Montgomery said.

“I think the governor's plan has much bigger fish to fry than Pinelands villages,” he added, saying he thinks the administration has its eye on paving the way for future industrial and transportation projects. But he is concerned the push to change the state plan could bring pressure to bear on the Pinelands Commission to expand growth in regional growth areas, suburban clusters at the edge of the Pinelands like those in Barnegat and Stafford.

Like other observers, Montgomery said he thinks the pressure to keep looser land-use controls is mostly to enable commercial rather than residential projects.

Bob Martin, commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Protection, said the State Strategic Plan aims to steer development into areas where infrastructure already exists to support it.

Like Rutgers experts, Martin indicated that administration officials don't believe the era of massive residential development is coming back anytime soon.

One good bet is on building “transit hubs,” he said, and that means “you're probably going to see more redevelopment in the suburban areas.”

But the political reality is the Legislature and administration are on the verge of keeping the suburban fringes open for more development whenever the economy recovers.

Votes in the Senate and Assembly are possible Thursday to keep using old sewer service area planning maps, and allow exceptions so builders can get connection permits to sites beyond boundaries that have been planned since 2008.

Sewer areas set the boundaries for suburban development. Without public sewers it's not practical to build houses on small lots and shopping centers.

"It's a land rush," said Tittel of the Sierra Club, who says lawmakers are trying to help their builder constituents bundle up projects for future use that would otherwise be outside sewer areas. The risk in that is exposing up to 300,000 acres of wildlife areas, stream corridors and other environmentally sensitive land, Tittel said.

Martin emphatically defended the administration's backing of sewer area openings.

"We support them, and here's why. Jon Corzine and Lisa Jackson (former governor and DEP commissioner) put in water quality management plans they knew could never get approved. All building would stop in the state of New Jersey," Martin said. The legislation will 'put some flexibility around what the counties can do.'

Jackson now heads the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and EPA officials pushed back hard on Martin. "The commissioner's statement is unfortunate and not based on the facts," EPA Region II administrator Judith Enck said.

Depending on the final language in the bills, they could allow exceptions for building outside the sewer lines. That would seriously undermine the Christie administration's own goal of restoring Barnegat Bay, said Helen Henderson of the American Littoral Society, a coastal conservation group.

Ocean County will be ready this spring to present its new sewer service maps, which would take 33,000 acres off the table for future development. County officials and the Littoral Society have been at odds over another 16,000 acres still in the new sewer areas, "but while we're bickering over those 16,000 acres, these bills could allow developers to get more," Henderson said. "That's a real punch in the stomach for Barnegat Bay."

By the reckoning of Ocean County planners, 57 percent of the county's land mass is in public ownership or otherwise preserved. As part of its Barnegat Bay restoration program, the DEP is aiming to acquire more than 3,000 acres in 2011-12, and 30,000 acres in the long-term, Martin said.

"We'll be looking at things holistically going forward," said Martin, who says administration officials looked to North Carolina and other states for philosophies on balancing growth and environmental protection.

"We're still going to have environmental standards in place," he insisted. "There's no plan or intent to lower environmental standards."

Michele S. Byers, executive director of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, said "it would be a welcome surprise if there was any pulling back of growth for the Shore area."

But no administration has overseen such a pullback in the last 60 to 80 years, and water quality will continue to be a problem, Byers said.

"Gov. Christie has an enormous opportunity to make a huge difference," she said.

More could be done to protect water quality, "provide quality public access to the waterways," protect barrier beaches by buying out houses that are in the wrong places and encourage revegetation of maritime forests and beach areas, Byers said.

Louise Usechak, chairwoman of the natural resources committee of the Monmouth County League of Women Voters, said she questions the construction of all the condominiums and high-rise apartment buildings along the shoreline.

“I just keep thinking all it’s going to take is one nasty, nasty hurricane and a direct hit and our area is going to be in shambles,” she said.

“No one is taking a broad view and saying, ‘look, over the next 40 years we have to pull back from the more vulnerable areas,’ ” she said.

## Additional Facts

The Future of New Jersey

### DEC. 25

**Energy:** New Jersey’s energy future has something for everybody — including controversy — as state officials advance plans to nourish the clean energy market but also rely more on natural gas.

### DEC. 26

#### New Jersey

**’s cities:** The challenge for New Jersey’s cities is to capitalize on the fact they’re virtually blank slates.

### DEC. 27

**Transportation:** Federal money, or the lack of it, will determine the course of transportation improvements and maintenance over the next decade. But the outlook for more money coming from Washington is bleak.

### DEC. 28

**Business innovation:** A transformation is under way in New Jersey in the aftermath of a recession that cost the state 265,000 jobs, or 6.5 percent of its employment. Experts think research companies can help jump-start the sluggish recovery.

### DEC. 29

**Sustainability:** Individuals and organizations are embracing sustainability, say New Jersey’s environmental leaders, but we have yet to institutionalize that commitment in law.

### DEC. 30

**Agriculture:** High land prices and ubiquitous development combine to create a perfect marriage in New Jersey: small farms that grow specialized crops and lots of customers. But to be profitable, farmers have to woo customers into buying directly at their farms.

### DEC. 31

**Education:** Public-private partnerships and charter schools are among the initiatives that could radically change the face of public education in New Jersey.

### TODAY

**The Shore:** The Jersey Shore can expect growth and more flooding in the not-so-distant future, experts say, a hazardous mix that can lead to increased property damage and pollution.

### MONDAY

**Gaming:** For New Jersey’s ailing horse racing and casino industries, policy makers are struggling to find the right medicine. Legalized sports betting may be on the horizon, but one thing that some say could save racetracks – slot machines – is still a nonstarter with Gov. Chris Christie.

### TUESDAY

**Population trends:** Baby boomers reach retirement age, facing economic uncertainty they may not have anticipated, and their generation is finally outnumbered by their children. Foreign-born residents continue to drive growth.

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