

Sea level rise: County's opportunity to lead by example **Half Moon Bay Review: June 8, 2016**

When my daughter was born 13 years ago, I stared at her tiny hands and wondered what they would enable her to do over the course of her lifetime. Play basketball? Ride a bike? Write a book? Raise her children if she eventually became a mother?

It's hard to look at young children, particularly the children of family members and friends, and not think about what the future will hold for them.

Though there are too many unknowns to predict what their lives as adults will be like, climate change and rising sea levels will almost certainly impact their opportunities and choices.

Though not a perfect analogy, consider how the Great Depression and World War II shaped the lives of our parents and grandparents. For many baby boomers, the Vietnam War was the defining event of their generation. For Gen X'ers, 9/11 and the war on terrorism have loomed large as they grew into adulthood, and for many millennials, the 2008 financial crisis has influenced how they see their future.

But climate change and sea level rise are different in a fundamental way.

The impacts of the events I mentioned on the generations most affected were either largely or completely unanticipated before they occurred. But we can see sea level rise coming a mile away. Sometimes referred to as "a slow-moving emergency," it well may be the defining event of our children's generation and those who follow.

Scientists predict that more than 350,000 people in the Bay Area's nine counties will have to move to higher ground if sea levels rise three feet by 2100, according to a recent article in the San Francisco Chronicle. More than 680,000 people will have to move if it rises six feet.

The article quotes Stanford climate specialist Katherine Mach as saying up to 190,000 people in San Mateo County would have to move if sea levels rise three feet and 250,000 would have to move if sea levels rise six feet.

Why aren't we doing more about it?

The fact is most of us will act on something if we feel our actions will have an impact on us, our families and our communities. For example, one of the things that makes many San Mateo County communities attractive to parents is the quality of its public schools.

Like many other places, parents' time and energy make an enormous difference, helping out with everything from schoolyard duty to organizing fundraisers.

But how can parents, or anyone who cares about the generations that follow, prevent the climate from changing or the sea level from rising? Like so many other problems facing the world, it's easy to feel overwhelmed and powerless.

But we can make a difference at the local level, regardless of what's going in Washington, and that's what some people are doing.

San Mateo County, one of the counties in California most at risk from sea level rise, is conducting a vulnerability assessment through an organization called Sea Change San Mateo County. This assessment is evaluating how representative assets including wastewater treatment plants, roads, schools, airports and wetlands will be impacted as water levels rise on both the bayside and coast.

The county, partnering with state's Coastal Commission, is working with city governments, community groups, businesses and other organizations. When the study is completed later this year, the county will continue to work with these groups to begin to develop mitigation and other options for the future.

The Bay Area, and the Silicon Valley in particular, prides itself as a place with the talent, resources, energy and courage to translate big ideas into practical solutions. Technology and the marketplace have important roles in addressing climate change and sea level rise, but political will and grass roots community activism are also critical.

If the people of San Mateo County can effectively marshal all of these forces together in coming years, we will find a way for successive generations to cope and hopefully thrive with the changes ahead. We'll also have an opportunity to show the rest of the country — and maybe the world — how to do it.

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