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A stronger, smarter New York

In the wake of Sandy, we have to rebuild with climate change in mind

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The devastation caused by Sandy.

Hurricane Sandy certainly lived up to her billing as a superstorm. But the devastation caused by the storm is just the tip of the iceberg.

Millions of people live in coastal cities — not just in America but in the emerging economies of Asia, South America and Africa. Rising sea levels and the freak storms that are associated with global climate change are increasingly placing them at risk.

Coastal locations are not only pleasant places to live when the weather is calm; they are exceptionally productive economically, as numerous studies show. Cities along the coasts account for a greater and greater share of the economic assets of our spiky world, where wealth is increasingly concentrated in a relatively small number of places. The bigger these cities become, the more they stand to lose.

A 2007 study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development ranked the cities most exposed to flooding, both in the present and projecting out to 2070. New York ranks third in terms of economic assets at risk to coastal flooding in 2070. Miami placed first, Guangzhou second, Calcutta fourth, Shanghai fifth and Mumbai sixth. New Orleans and Virginia Beach also made the top 20.

The report identified some 40 million people considered at risk from a “1 in 100 year coastal flood event” in 2005, a figure that will rise to 150 million people, with possible damage running to \$35 trillion (nearly 10% of global GDP), by 2070.

As one of the world’s richest cities, New York has an obligation not just to rebuild but to show the world how to rebuild the right way — smarter, greener, more resilient than ever. New York is the very definition of resilience. It has absorbed several body blows in the past decade and bounced right back — the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the financial collapse of 2008 and now Sandy.

Part of it comes down to the character of its people and communities. Part of it is the nature of urban systems, which allowed critical infrastructure to “fail safely.” Neighborhoods were evacuated as the storm approached; bridges and tunnels were closed and secured. Federal, state and local first responders communicated with one another, coordinating their efforts.

As densely developed as New York is, its people and institutions are deeply interconnected. After the electricity, the Internet and the cell phones went down, the most densely populated parts of the city were able to bounce back quickest. Density makes it possible for people to improvise ways to get around, even when communication and transportation nexuses fail — they car-pool, ride bikes, walk.

New York’s rebuilding must set an example for the rest of the world. The city and region must take the lead in adopting the best available flood control measures and in reducing its carbon footprint.

At the same time, it must also bolster its resiliency by creating a less centralized power grid with more built-in redundancy, passing regulations that discourage development on floodplains and

encourage the restoration of barrier islands and wetlands that can buffer surges and developing technology that facilitates crowdsourcing of critical information.

Visionary city planners have been proposing such ideas for years — perhaps politicians will be more receptive to them now.

The early indications are that they will be. Days after the storm, Mayor Bloomberg endorsed President Obama, largely because of his stance on climate change.

And as Gov. Cuomo put it, “We need to anticipate more of these extreme weather-type situations in the future, and we have to take that into consideration in reforming and modifying our infrastructure, our built-in environment.” The challenge, he added, “is not just to build it back, but to build back better than before.”

Great cities don’t restore themselves according to their original blueprints; they adapt to new circumstances and change.

As Christopher Kennedy of the University of Toronto notes in his important book “The Evolution of Great World Cities,” London revised its building codes and widened its streets in response to the Great Fire of 1666. This increased its population density, which in turn sped up its commercial and creative metabolism. A cholera epidemic provided the impetus for Haussmann’s epochal transformation of Paris.

For all the suffering a storm like Sandy causes, it could also be the catalyst for renewal. The leaders of New York and New Jersey can provide the broad bipartisan voice that compels Washington to forge a bold agenda for rebuilding America’s infrastructure.

A new wave of investment in preparing communities for the 21st century could turn out to be an enduring stimulus that finally lifts the national economy back on the path to sustained prosperity.

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