

Preparing Florida for Future Storms

Mayor Philip Levine

In the age-old fable of the Three Little Pigs, only one out of three houses—the brick house—is sufficiently resilient to guard against the wolf knocking at their door. After Hurricane Irma, much of our infrastructure has proven to be straw and wood.

Irma left no part of Florida untouched. The storm left Jacksonville and other cities flooded and without power. In the Keys, entire communities lost their homes and livelihoods, and in one nursing home in Hollywood, eight seniors lost their lives. Yet it could have been even worse. Had the eye not gone westward, much of the East coast of Florida could easily be in the same situation as the Keys. In Miami, in Tampa, in Orlando, in Pensacola, and in cities all across our state—we didn't just dodge a bullet; we dodged a cannon.

Yet, with sea levels rising and the temperature warming, extreme weather events—such as in Texas and now Florida—are unfortunately the new normal. As we rebuild and recover as one state in Irma's aftermath, we must now look towards what lessons can be learned—what can we do to better prepare our local communities for the future storms at our doorstep?

As the Mayor of a coastal city, I have witnessed firsthand what good government can do to identify and invest in innovative solutions to address environmental and infrastructural deficiencies. With strategic and decisive action, I am proud of the fact that in Miami Beach, we've implemented and begun to execute a plan to make our city more resilient against sea-level rise during my time in office. However, let's be clear—most cities cannot afford to do it on their own, nor should they. To better safeguard our environment, real estate market and tourism-based economy, state leadership must do their part.

To this effect, I believe there are a few initial steps that current and future state leadership should take to push Florida in the right direction:

1. **Foster Local Resiliency** – State leadership should create a resiliency commission, to be chaired by a Chief Resiliency Officer (appointed by the Governor). Formed from a body of leaders and experts across the state, this commission could coordinate with currently existing regional planning councils, providing expertise and a tailored blueprint—city by city, town by town—on how to make each of our local communities more resilient against the environmental threats they face, whether they are hurricanes, sea level rise, water quality, infectious diseases or agricultural pests or any other natural disaster.
2. **Invest in Resilient Infrastructure** – The state government should make a considerable investment in our cities' infrastructure and resiliency by creating a

dedicated resiliency fund. This fund would partner with local municipalities who have identified weaknesses and available to co-invest. Through this, we can create new jobs and boost our economy, while simultaneously creating properly flowing waterways in Lake Okeechobee, stronger bridges, higher sea walls and raising roads in low-lying coastal cities, or even creating new underground power systems protected from hurricane-force winds across the state of Florida.

3. State-of-the-art Emergency Communications – Drawing from our existing resources, we need to upgrade to a new, high-tech state-of-the-art hurricane communication system, connecting all of our government agencies together. There is no reason that the tragedy that occurred at a Hollywood Hills nursing home should happen in our modern information age. By creating a fast-acting network between police, fire, first responders, FEMA, Red Cross, NOAA and the Governor's administration, our state can react quickly to minimize dangers and prepare for impending disaster.

These ideas are only a starting point for discussion and a springboard for action, while creating a better-prepared Florida. More than ever, I believe that Floridians need less talking points and more solutions. We cannot afford to waste any more time with political rhetoric and point scoring. With state and local communities working hand-in-hand, we can be better prepared to face them together.

When the next hurricane comes knocking, the question is which house will we live in—the straw house, the wood house, or the brick house? The choice is ours to make.