

Resilience is not a concept for someone else

Hurricane Michael devastated areas that are only 30 miles from Seaside. Are we ready?

By Mark Schnell



Friends and family living in places beyond Florida and the Gulf Coast have asked me on several occasions how we can live in a place that's one storm away from being wiped off the map.

If they are from California (earthquakes, fires, mudslides), I respond that we at least have ample warning about hurricanes. If they are from the Great Plains or much of the interior Southeast, I respond that we have much more warning than a tornado (when you might have a few minutes after you hear a siren — if you hear it at all).

I think I have some pretty good answers in this game you might call "Who has the worst natural disasters?" I'm not sure anyone really "wins," but sometimes you have to laugh so you don't cry. They are called disasters for a good reason, and unlike other words indicating something large and exceptional (I'm looking at you, "awesome" and "epic"), this one hasn't been overly diluted of its meaning yet.

Despite the advanced warning, I admit that it can be taxing to monitor these destructive monsters lurking around the Gulf of Mexico for six months of every year. And when one hits close to home — as happened when Category 5 Michael made landfall only 30 miles away last year — it seems like almost anywhere else would be preferable. We dodged a bullet. But there's no reason that it couldn't be us next time.

So, what can our community do?

This topic was explored in the recent symposium at the Seaside Institute titled "Transforming Communities Through New Urbanism After a Natural Disaster." I had the pleasure of attending and participating in this enlightening and informative event.

For the final session of the symposium, I moderated a discussion with former Charleston Mayor Joseph Riley and current Panama City city manager Major General (retired) Mark McQueen. Both were in their leadership roles when destructive hurricanes hit their cities (Hugo hit Charleston in 1989 and Michael hit Panama City in 2018).

Gen. McQueen's presentation was filled with grim statistics and facts from Hurricane Michael:

- Only 20 percent of Bay County residents evacuated.
- In the aftermath of the storm, Panama City's population has dropped from over 36,000 to an estimated 26,000 to 28,000.
- This exodus was fueled in part by the city's high percentage of rental housing: 70 percent renters versus 30 percent homeowners.
- The city lost an estimated one million trees.
- In 10 months, the city hauled off 36 years-worth of their annual average trash and debris.
- The City of Panama City is forced to pay the enormous upfront recovery costs until state and federal aid arrives. (And, as Gen. McQueen noted, a local government is least prepared to absorb those costs.)
- Tax revenue will be down substantially this year.



Mark Schnell gives a walking tour during the Transforming Communities Through New Urbanism After a Natural Disaster symposium. Photo by Rick Hall

- The population drop is happening at a key moment when the Census is taking place, potentially eliminating sources of revenue for the city.

There's no question that our friends and neighbors to the east are still suffering, but they are on the path to recovery. And, thankfully, they are thinking beyond the immediate recovery efforts. They approved a strong New Urban vision plan for the future of their downtown, and they are working on plans for other areas as well. As someone said during the symposium, a disaster like this exposes and exacerbates problems that were already in place. These plans go a long way towards overcoming those existing issues to create a better, more resilient future.

The word "resilience" is frequently used these days, especially as the effects of climate change enter our lives. I don't think I fully grasped the importance of this con-

cept until I heard Gen. McQueen and Mayor Riley discuss their experiences, and until I experienced the effects of Hurricane Harvey on several communities I designed on the Texas coast.

Resilience, of course, is about getting back on your feet after a disaster knocks you down. Time is a very important factor for a community, especially for a local economy. When your place of business or employment blows away, you might not have a job for a while. You won't have power or communications for a while, either. The amount of time required to rebuild or repair is of vital importance. But even then, if one-third of the community simply left town — as happened in Panama City — you might not have enough customers for your business anyway.

One goal is to minimize damage in the first place, and another is to design systems for rapid recovery. We are collectively getting better at

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this, but there is still a long way to go. And we will be dealing with the weaknesses of some older construction and systems for a long time.

Building codes within hurricane zones have drastically improved the performance of new buildings. After Hurricane Harvey, I waited for the news from the three communities I designed in Port Aransas, Texas: Cinnamon Shore, Palmilla Beach and Sunflower Beach. I was relieved to discover that the construction had generally stood firm through the 135 mile-per-hour winds, and the slightly raised houses avoided flooding. There was still some damage, but it could have been much worse. Here in South Walton, Alys Beach is leading the way by building to Fortified for Safer Living standards. With concrete construction and plastered roof tiles, those houses are going to survive just about anything. It's a very expensive way to build, but I can't help but wonder if it will eventually be the wave of the future (pun intended) for coastal areas.

We can build for wind. But there is virtually nothing we can do about water — except build higher, or in the best-case scenario, on higher ground.

We are fortunate here in South Walton to build atop an unusually high pile of sand. This area is reportedly the highest elevation along the entire Gulf of Mexico coast. Seaside is approximately 20 feet above sea level, Seagrove sits a little higher at 35, and parts of Blue Mountain (slightly inland from the beach) reach the lofty height of 70 feet. This helps immensely with storm surge. Even so, Gulf-front development is still in danger from a big storm. Thankfully, the developer and designers of Seaside had



Mark Schnell moderates a panel discussion with Major General (Retired) Mark McQueen (center) and former Mayor Joseph Riley of Charleston (right). Photo by Rick Hall

the foresight to build well behind the dunes, and they did so at time when it was not required by the State of Florida.

The rest of Florida and other hurricane-prone coastal areas are usually much lower in elevation. Those places try to cope by raising houses above a certain level — usually around 11 feet. Many such houses survive the storm surge, but many do not. When you see the destructive power of water firsthand, it's hard not to conclude that we simply should not continue to build in places that are most susceptible to flooding and storm surge. Of course, that's easier said than done. The notoriously low and flood-prone city of New Orleans struggled with this issue after Katrina. They ultimately decided to rebuild in those areas.

During my time living in Boulder, Colo., many years ago, I learned that the city had spent many years slowly buying property along Boulder Creek to create a flood buffer zone that doubles as a park. In an area prone to flash floods, it was a very smart long-term move. Coastal areas might ultimately need to follow their lead in some form. How much longer will insurance pay to rebuild in areas where it's just a matter of

time until the next disaster? How much longer will the state and federal governments fund the recovery of such places? The time may come when it's simply too expensive.

Infrastructure is another area of concern. I asked Gen. McQueen if he was in favor of placing utilities underground. He said that it would be very helpful in many places, although less so in others. But then he went bigger with the idea: He said that all utilities within 20 miles of the coast should be designed for maximum resilience. I was struck by his answer, and I think this needs to be a focus for our state and local governments moving forward. This is a decorated military leader who knows what it takes to be prepared.

It's important for us to listen to leaders like McQueen and Riley. In order to bury the power lines, we need to stop burying our heads in the sand when it comes to resilience.

Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrove Beach. Among his most prominent projects are three New Urban beach communities on the Texas coast: Cinnamon Shore, Palmilla Beach, and Sunflower Beach. Learn more about his firm Schnell Urban Design at SchnellUrbanDesign.com.

Expand Your Palate

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amples of wines that have vintage fluctuations, as opposed to manipulated grocery store wines that taste the same from vintage to vintage. They are family owned wine labels versus the corporate, mega-conglomerates. These are wines that may not even make it into each state, let alone restaurant or wine list. These are for the true oenophile, and I am sharing them with you.

I hope that I helped you narrow down your focus for this year's festival, encouraged you to go outside your comfort zone, try new wines and continue learning about wine. If you are interested in these wines, you can reach out to the people at my favorite wine bar, Ji•Shi Ki•chn. I've tried to highlight some of the small, family-owned labels that I encourage everyone to support and shared some of my industry knowledge with you. Thank you for trusting me with your palates and enjoy the Seeing Red Wine Festival. Cheers! 🍷

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