Start Now to Plan Bold, Creative Responses
to Sea Level Covering Downtown Olympia

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This article combines seriousness and creative jest to help us understand Olympia’s future.

Scientists keep revising estimates of climate disruption upward – and their time-frame more urgent.

You’ve probably seen some of the serious reports from the world’s most knowledgeable climate experts. Very often they issue newer reports saying that the crisis is rapidly getting worse. The newer reports say that extremely serious disruptions and damage will occur sooner than they had been expecting. Those two trends – seriousness and urgency – keep getting worse.

Some of the most recent reports have expressed outright alarm that enormous glaciers worldwide are melting at a rapid pace, and enormous parts of Antarctica’s ice sheets are breaking off. Some reports have gone beyond talking about the sea level rising a few feet, and some are now talking about sea-level rise of **dozens of feet**.

National, state, and local governments are far, far more timid than the rapidly worsening crisis needs.

Climate “deniers” are obviously ridiculous (and corrupt) beyond anything reasonable. Governments are supposed to know better, but their timidity and dawdling are – in effect – a kind of “denial,” as they consider minimal planning on a timeline that will soon be overcome by harsh realities.

Yes, Olympia too will be inundated by sea level rise.

The City of Olympia – which says it cares about the climate and sea level rise – is not doing nearly enough. Olympia was built on waterfront marshy areas, so early in Olympia‘s history, fill dirt was brought in to create dry land so streets and buildings could be built. Downtown’s water table is just a very few feet below the streets and buildings. A few decades ago a huge amount of fill dirt was brought in to create dry land on what’s called the “port peninsula.”

Sea level rise is likely to inundate downtown Olympia, the “port peninsula,” the isthmus between downtown and the West Side, the 5th Avenue Dam, and nearby areas. **I am astounded** that people are still building downtown (including the Hands-On Children’s Museum, the new Olympia City Hall, and many big, expensive privately owned buildings).  **Likewise, I am astounded** that the City government is still encouraging building structures that will become underwater in a few decades.

Some folks are talking about some kind of “sea wall” to protect downtown. However, you can’t fool Mother Nature! Man-made obstacles don’t work. **We need to accept the reality that downtown Olympia might indeed by inundated by salt water, so we must devise bold, creative remedies.**

When downtown Olympia is underwater, what will the new realities be?

I mentioned above that the “port peninsula,” the isthmus, and the 5th Avenue Dam will be underwater. So will the entire area north of 5th Avenue from the Deschutes Estuary (which must be restored too as soon as we remove the dam that blocks the Deschutes River) to Plum Street. All one-story buildings will be underwater. So will the second stories of some buildings taller than one-story.

If you own a multi-story building on 5th Avenue or northward, you might consider replacing the second story’s floor with very sturdy glass so people on the second story can watch the marine life swimming underneath through what used to be your building’s first story.

Instead of worrying about downtown parking, business owners and customers can worry about how their customers could tie up their small boats to the outsides of the buildings so they can shop and eat inside. I recommend converting many second-story windows into exterior entrances, and I recommend much hardware near those exterior entrances so people can tie their boats’ ropes to the new hardware and step into the buildings.

The City will have to decide whether to install parking meters attached to those moorage points.

The vast majority of us who do not own boats will have to figure out how to get access to boats. I do not recommend replicating the current problem of thousands of privately owned cars with thousands of privately owned boats trying to cram vehicles into the limited number of moorage spaces. Boat taxis will become much more common, even if they are no more affordable than automobile taxis. Perhaps Intercity Transit could invest in passenger boats to bring people in from the surrounding hills (West Olympia, the East Side, and Tumwater using the Deschutes River).

The large number of homeless and alienated people who hang out downtown will go somewhere else – perhaps to YOUR neighborhood.

The dilemma of what to do with the Artesian Well Park between 4th and 5th, west of Jefferson Street will need a new solution – a taller pipe so people can arrive by boat and fill up their water jugs – but the pipe’s outfall will be at a higher elevation, so we’ll need more time to fill our water jugs. The basketball backboard will be underwater, so the poor people who used to play there will be replaced by upscale people playing water polo (an upscale sport), so now rich people will be attracted to the Artesian Well Park. This is a great opportunity for the investors and elites who want to gentrify downtown.

Create a big, new waterfront beach for Olympia.

In 1975 when I moved here, the City encouraged people to swim in Capitol Lake. The 5th Avenue Dam has made that artificial lake extremely unhealthy, so people now are prohibited from entering it, prohibited from letting their dogs jump in, and prohibited from boating in it. The beach has been closed to the public for many years. We are allowed to walk around it, so long as we don’t touch the water. But when downtown Olympia is submerged, we can create a new beach uphill so people can enjoy water access.

When sea level rise covers all of downtown from 5th Avenue northward, and from the Deschutes River to Plum Street, we will have the opportunity for a gigantic waterfront beach stretching along there, and – since beaches slope uphill – the new beach can extend all the way to 8th Avenue, for the full width east-to-west. This would mean tearing down all of the buildings north of 8th Avenue and filling that wide swath with sand to create a great recreational beach on the south side of what used to be downtown. The City could bring in a lot of sand and spread it from 5th or Legion south to 8th Avenue, and from Plum Street to the Deschutes River. We could build a new public library somewhere else and turn the existing library on 8th into a nice set of dressing rooms, public bathrooms, and a modest-priced restaurant and concession stand for people using the beach.

We could name the beach for the person – more than any other person in the whole world – who will held responsible for drowning Olympia: “Donald J. Trump Beach.”