

OUTLOOK

We're taking baby steps on hurricane protection



Bill King says establishing a National Recreation Area along the Texas Gulf Coast is a move in the right direction, but more action is needed.

After the disastrous Hurricane Rita evacuation, I served on two task forces that studied the threat posed by major storms to the Texas Gulf Coast and what could be done to mitigate the damage they cause.

At the heart of the matter is our painfully obvious vulnerability. We live on a wide, flat coastal plain with nothing between us and the Gulf to slow down a surge tide. Less obvious is that just off the coast, there is an unusually elongated and shallow continental shelf, which acts to stack up a storm's surge and shove it farther inland than in places where the shelf drops off quickly, such as Florida. If a major storm makes landfall any place along the Texas Gulf Coast, there will be a massive wall of water careening many miles inland.

If you got over to Bolivar or Chambers County after Hurricane Ike, you saw first-hand this dynamic at work. Bolivar looked like a nuclear bomb had been dropped on it. Mountains of debris were shoved north nearly to Interstate 10.

What is little appreciated is how much worse the situation would have been if Ike had made landfall 20 miles to 30 miles to the west. If that had happened,

Galveston and communities along the west shore of Galveston Bay would have been decimated. Instead of around a hundred, thousands would have died. The surge would likely have overtopped the levees around dozens, if not hundreds, of chemical plants and waste-storage facilities. The environmental damage would have been unimaginable.

With an obvious threat and a near miss like Ike, you might assume that our region has been busily at work preparing for the next storm. Actually, not so much.

Apparently Centerpoint Energy has done a great deal of work to improve the electric grid's resiliency and make the system easier to repair after the storm. Some individual facilities and buildings have been hardened. But as far as major, regional initiatives, we are pretty much sitting on a goose egg. The 2011 Texas Legislature, consumed with the state's budget problems and such pressing issues as sonograms, immigration and redistricting, could not find the time to address one of the most critical existential threats to the state.

Some ideas have been put forward. Texas A&M-Galveston professor Bill Merrill floated the idea of a massive dike with a sea gate from Galveston to Bolivar. His proposed project, dubbed the Ike Dike, has gone nowhere due to concerns about its cost and environmental effects.

After more than a year of study, Rice University's Severe Storm Prediction

Education and Evacuation from Disasters Center (SSPEED) has issued the first phase of a comprehensive report looking at various alternatives for mitigating hurricane damage. The report sketches out a rough plan with multiple elements.

The plan retains the Merrill idea of a sea gate, but moves it north to the mouth of the Houston Ship Channel. This would be much more affordable while still protecting critical infrastructure along the Ship Channel and many of the environmentally hazardous sites.

But it leaves the homes of about a half million residents unprotected, along with some critical sites, such as the Johnson Space Center, and a number of hazardous waste sites. To address these issues, SSPEED's plan suggests the possibility of dikes encircling much of Galveston Island and along State

Highway 146. But it seems likely that such an extensive dike system's cost and environmental obstacles would be only marginally less daunting than Merrill's proposal.

Although the report has a tremendous amount of information regarding the threat we face, it left me no more certain as to the best way forward with respect to structural

solutions.

However, the report also includes an extensive discussion of potential "non-structural" elements to a hurricane mitigation plan. One of the most important of these is the conservation and enhancement of the region's wetlands. Wetlands act as a storage area for storm surge water, diverting it from areas where it would do more damage.

As a vehicle to preserve and enhance the region's wetlands, SSPEED has proposed the establishment of a National Recreation Area (NRA) along the Texas upper Gulf Coast. NRAs were authorized by Congress in the 1960s. They are basically a voluntary organization that acts as a convener of interested parties and stakeholders to develop conservation projects.

The proposal has received former Secretary of State James Baker's gold-plated endorsement. He has teamed with businessman John Nau to promote the formation of the Lone Star Coastal NRA.

While hardly the comprehensive plan the region needs, the creation of an NRA is the low-hanging fruit from the various alternatives we have identified so far. It also comes with a number of ancillary benefits, including much needed economic development through ecotourism.

It is not a big step in the direction we need to go, but at least it is in the right direction.

Email King at weking@weking.net and follow him on twitter.com/weking.



Health care work force will be tested by reform

Affordable Care Act will greatly expand insurance coverage

By Joanne Spetz

Much of the public discussion about health care reform has focused on whether various components of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) are constitutional, and whether the act can be repealed. But an arguably more important question is whether our health care work force is large enough to handle the future needs of Americans — particularly if health insurance becomes available and affordable as envisioned in nearly all health care reform proposals.

I have just completed a study for the Baker Institute for Public Policy that considers whether the health care work force is ready to meet the demands of health reform. Research indicates that people with health insurance use more health care services than those who are uninsured. With the ACA projected to provide insurance coverage to an additional 35.2 million people by 2014, we should expect a surge in demand for all types of health care, from doctor's visits to surgeries. To meet this demand, we need a good supply of all types of health workers, from medical assistants to specialist physicians.

When Massachusetts enacted universal insurance coverage, widespread shortages of primary care providers were reported. One study found that one of five nonelderly adults had difficulty receiving care. The surge in demand for health care services that will come in 2014 will be even greater in areas that now have high rates of uninsured, many of which also have low physician supply. States in the south central region — including Texas — are projected to have greater shortages of primary care providers than other parts of the country.

Beyond simply expanding health insurance coverage, the ACA emphasizes preventive care as a strategy to both improve the health status of Americans and control costs. The focus on preventive care should increase demand for primary care providers as well as other health workers who support primary care, such as laboratory technicians, nurses and phlebotomists. Primary care physicians spend about half of their time on preventive care and screenings, and much of this care can be offered by nurse practitioners, physician assistants and registered nurses.

A large number of health work force development programs are authorized

by the ACA. The law provides increased grants to health professions education institutions for the training of primary care physicians, physician assistants and dental professionals. The grants can cover the cost of operating education programs as well as provide financial assistance to students. Funds are allocated to educate people as licensed practical nurses, nursing assistants, direct care workers, and in other assisting fields.

But the authorizations in the ACA do not guarantee funds for these programs. Congress may fully or partially fund the programs, or not fund them at all. In order to address potential shortages that might be driven by the ACA, and take full advantage of the ACA's focus on preventive care and integrated care delivery, Congress and state legislatures need to focus on expanding the health work force and supporting collaboration between health workers.

Health professional education is often more expensive than other fields of study due to the need for supplies, clinical placements and low student-to-faculty ratios. Funds are necessary to expand medical education, as well as training for physician assistants, nurses and nurse practitioners, laboratory workers, pharmacists and pharmacy staff, health educators, and imaging technicians. We will need more of all of these workers in the next decade simply to care for our aging population, even if the ACA's health insurance expansion is not fully implemented. Congress and states also need to examine payment and licensing systems that create artificial barriers to collaboration between health workers. Payment systems need to be reformed both to provide an incentive to deliver primary care, and to bring more physicians, physician assistants and nurse practitioners to select primary care as their field of work. All health workers need to be allowed to practice to the fullest extent of their education, so that their knowledge can be brought to improving the health of all Americans.

Spetz, a professor at the Philip R. Lee Institute for Health Policy Research at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), is the author of the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy report, "Health Reform and the Health Care Work Force." Spetz also has faculty appointments in UCSF's Department of Family and Community Medicine and School of Nursing, and is a faculty researcher at the UCSF Center for the Health Professions. The Sid W. Richardson Foundation endowment and the Health Policy Forum at the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy supported this report.

There's nothing to fear in Girl Scouts' 'radicalized' agenda



Leonard Pitts Jr. says ignore the warnings of a socially conservative legislator who claimed the group seeks to destroy traditional values.

Bob Morris is scared of Girl Scouts. If you are waiting for the punch line, sorry, but there isn't one. Morris, an Indiana state legislator, recently attacked the Scouts in a letter to his colleagues urging them to vote down a nonbinding resolution honoring the group on its centennial. There has never been a safer, more plain-vanilla measure in the history of American politics, but Morris felt the need to warn fellow legislators of the organization's corrupting influence. The Girl Scouts, he wrote, is the "tactical arm" of Planned Parenthood. He called it a "radicalized" group with a homosexual agenda that promotes abortion while seeking "the destruction of traditional American values."

That's a lot to lay on little girls whose mission in life seems to be the selling of Thin Mints. But Morris has what he

considers sound reasons for believing them a threat. He says he did "a small amount" of online research that revealed to him the true nature of these terroristic cookie pimps. And as everyone knows, if you read it on the web, it has to be true, right? Sigh.

Thus does social conservatism skid through the last barriers of basic intellect, simple decency and common sense, hurtling breakneck off the deep end. Next stop: utter incoherence.

There is, in a sense, nothing new here. Fear has long been the sine qua non of social conservatism, the fundament of an "us against them" ethos that simultaneously binds social conservatives together in common cause and separates them from the rest of the world. Like the mental patient who is emperor of a self-created universe invisible to sane people,

they believe themselves the defenders of a moral North Star from which the rest of the world has deviated — and to which they are determined to return us.

It might be easy enough to write Morris off as a podunk legislator of no concern to anyone outside his district. But such sanguinity requires the belief that he is an anomaly. He is not. To the contrary, this brand of fraidy-cat politics where "they" are ever out to get you and the sky is forever falling has become a staple of the Republican Party.

You could look to almost any of the GOP's recent presidential aspirants as proof, or you could just use Rick Santorum as one-stop shopping. He is the state of the art.

In years past, he called birth control "harmful" and questioned whether it works — something that has been regarded as settled science for decades. Just days ago, he bashed college education as a scheme of "indoctrination" and attacked 49-years-dead John F. Kennedy for a 1960 speech generally regarded as a landmark statement against religious bigotry. Somehow, in Santorum's fevered mind, it became a statement in support of what it opposed.

But then, social conservatism is where logic fears to tread. It is a worldview driven by fear of the world beyond its racial, gender, religious, cultural and intellectual borders. Historically, it always has been.

Fear the Japanese, they said. They are collaborating with our enemies. Fear the communists, they said. They are hiding behind every bush. Fear the gays, they say. They want to recruit our children to their lifestyle.

And now? Fear the Girl Scouts. They are trying to conquer America one cookie at a time.

And you have to wonder: How narrow must a man's worldview be, how paranoid his outlook, what a bunker his very life, when he is scared of Girl Scouts?

Some of us have argued that social conservatives use fear as a tactic. And there's likely some truth to that. But one senses little of tactical planning in Morris' missive. No, the fact is, he believes what he says. Many of them do.

If you want to be scared of something, be scared of that.

Pitts' email address is lpitts@miamiberald.com.