

## Forget the Ike Dike, let's improve building methods

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In "Why the 'Ike Dike' is still a good idea" (Page B10, May 2), William Merrell eloquently made the case for a large scale "Ike Dike" that would run 50-some miles from the San Luis Pass to High Island on the north. For the highly urbanized Houston/Galveston region it is not a question of if, but when the next big hurricane will strike. It is also important to note that for all its devastation, Ike would have caused incredibly more damage had it hit our "sweet spot" to the southwest. We really do need to think about planning for the future.

Merrell places his faith in a structural solution: the Ike Dike, a very large levee. One thing we need to remember about levees is that old saw about there being only two kinds: those that have failed and those that will fail. If we decide to build a levee, we need to think about the consequences of levee failure. Would the consequences be worse than if we hadn't built it? The other thing about levees is that if you build them, they will come. "They" being more people and more activities. If the Ike Dike is built, we can be absolutely sure that many people will build in low-lying areas that are being avoided today. About 80 percent of the people living behind the 1960s-built levees of the lower 9th ward in New Orleans moved there after the levees were built, even though the rationale for building them was to protect existing development. The existence of those levees constituted a "moral hazard," a false sense of security that lured people into these areas, exacerbated no doubt by the fact that flood insurance for mortgages was not required behind the levees. We know now too well the consequences of that policy.

If a structural solution like the Ike Dike could end up making things worse, what are our alternatives? No. 1 is to plan where and how we build.

The Houston region will continue to grow as it has in the past when this recession is finally over. Where will this growth go? Too much already is happening in low-lying areas of Galveston and Brazoria Counties. So much development has occurred already in these areas that some insurers are pulling out altogether because of too much exposure. The presence of a large dike, especially if touted as infallible, would increase several-fold the amount of development, just as happened in New Orleans.

We should perhaps consider any area under 20 feet of elevation as a hazard zone. Should we be subsidizing insurance for homeowners and businesses in this area? People would think twice if they had to pay the full price for flood insurance to live in low-lying, flood-prone coastal areas. We should consider removing these subsidies at least for new development in the area. There is plenty of area to develop above 20 feet but still relatively near the coast.

Consider this: Fifty percent or more of the built environment that will exist in 2040 has yet to be constructed. That means we have an unparalleled opportunity to reshape our environment, to make it

much more resilient. We cannot escape the fact that we live in a hazardous coastal area, even if we avoid areas below 20 feet of elevation. But we can ensure that better and stronger structures are built here. A fraction of the billions of dollars that would go into the Ike Dike could go a long way toward providing assistance and incentives to homeowners and businesses to build more resistant structures.

The Strand in Galveston stands as a monument to the kind of construction and urban pattern most resilient to coastal hazards like hurricanes. Nearly every building on the Strand was there before the Great Storm of 1900. The Strand exemplifies what we call Smart Growth or New Urbanism today: compact, sturdy and walkable development.

Commuter rail along Highway 3 between Houston and Galveston is starting to emerge as a real possibility. Transit, more than any other factor, enables compact and walkable communities, which if built sturdy enough would be the most resilient form of urbanization, with an unequalled escape mechanism built in. This is the kind of infrastructure we should be thinking about.

Rather than sink our treasure into a large public works project of dubious benefit, let's build vibrant and resilient coastal communities, in the right places, that will be better and safer places to live and that will be a legacy for our children and grandchildren.

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