

From disaster and loss comes progress

A few weeks ago, Sallie had several paintings accepted into an art show in New York, so we decided to attend the opening and make it sort of weekend vacation. The show was not in Manhattan but rather on Long Island in Queens.

We stayed at a hotel in Rockaway Beach. We had never spent much time in an outlying New York borough, but viewing the entire Manhattan skyline from our hotel window reminded us that we were not far from the Big Apple.

I always find visiting resort/retreat communities informative in that I like comparing them to Highlands. Rockaway Beach is a retreat community of sorts since it is a short distance from the big city. The hotel provided Sallie and me with bicycles, and we rode them for about 10 miles on the concrete boardwalk that followed the beach. The boardwalk was full of folks walking, running, riding bicycles, especially electric-powered ones, and, of course, skateboards.

Traditionally New Yorkers have gone to Rockaway to enjoy the beach and to surf while many commute. It was a bit cool, but plenty of folks were surfing. I suspect most surfers were permanent residents since they carried racks on their bicycles for surfboards.

What impressed me was that the boardwalk was a gateway to multiple park facilities that were also filled with athletic activities. As we rode down the boardwalk, we saw full pickleball, handball, tennis courts, skateboard parks, and numerous playgrounds.

Although huge apartment complexes filled the skyline, small bungalow homes were neatly tucked into the area's fabric, and the two seemed to live together in harmony, big and small, tourist and resident.

Rockaway Beach has a lot higher population density than Highlands, but there was still a sense of environmental awareness at the shoreline. All the parks were landscaped, and the New York Park Service has done extensive beach restoration, including replanting large areas of sea oats and other indigenous plants.

But there is another story about Rockaway Beach. On October 29, 2021, Rockaway Beach was a victim of Hurricane Sandy. The old historic wooden boardwalk was destroyed as well as many historic structures. The boardwalk that Sallie and I enjoyed is a new concrete replacement structure. It serves as a wonderful access point to the restored beaches and parks and a barrier for the homes and businesses on the other side. Those parks are all new, too. I looked at photos of the damage Hurricane Sandy inflicted, and almost everything on the shoreline was either damaged or totally destroyed.

My lasting impression from our visit is that from disaster and loss often comes the opportunity for restoration and renewal. While we haven't had such disastrous losses as those incurred by Hurricane Sandy, Highlands, like all communities, has had periods of loss followed by renewal and change. We have to balance and juggle the ongoing process of change and loss with progress and restoration.

Here are a few examples of rather small Highland changes in recent years. A decade ago, we built a much more expensive all-year swimming pool. It has been more expensive to operate. But much like the changes at Rockaway Beach, which were costly, the benefits for everyone outweigh the costs.

Community change can come from natural disasters and from just changes in personal activity preferences.

A few years ago, the town had several underutilized tennis courts that we had to maintain. Recognizing a change in user activity preferences, the town board decided to eliminate two tennis courts and created six (6) outdoor pickleball courts. The pickleball courts are jammed now and for most of the year with avid players. Out of disuse and with investment comes positive results.

As I remember all those children playing in the parks on Rockaway Beach, I get excited and hopeful about the proposed new, inclusive playground for the Highlands Recreation Center. The playground will be expensive for sure, but the cost will be balanced by the benefits and joy of children for years to come. I hope the town, county, private citizens, and other government sources will come forth to make this children's park a reality. Fundraising is underway.

I have a link for information about the new children's park at AskMayorPat.com.