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Time to recognize the basic flaw in our whole approach to flood prevention

Opinion By [Jed Horne](#) | August 11, 2017





Ryan Hamilton

The flooding, here on Palmyra Street, swept across much of Mid-City on Saturday.

A storm comes. The city floods, yet again. And so we revert to form, squabble angrily in public forums and look for scapegoats.

Global warming's to blame. No, it's Sewerage & Water Board honcho Joe Becker with [his lies about pump capacity](#). No, the rainfall amounts were simply extraordinary — no system could keep up with them. The maintenance budget is underfunded. Catch basins weren't cleaned. Mayor Landrieu should have rushed back more quickly from his conference in Aspen. To do what? Bail out the city with a bucket?

Get used to it, folks. This is the new normal. (Lying public officials included? I'll come back to that.)

Half the city is below sea level. And evidently one symptom of the onrushing climate change some still deny is the gathering frequency of super-intense rainfall events. Ten inches in a matter of hours. Does that excuse the negligence of the officials paid to keep an intricate pump system at peak efficiency? Hardly. The intensity of the rainfall is the reason why Saturday's failure — a

Sewerage & Water Board asleep at the switch — is utterly inexcusable. Top that off with the Wednesday night [fire at the Sewerage & Water Board's Carrollton power plant](#), leaving us more vulnerable than ever to torrential rain.

How quickly we seem to be lapsing back into the careless, won't-happen-here attitude that turned a mid-sized storm like Katrina into a lethal catastrophe. After that ordeal, vigilance was declared a civic responsibility. Katrina had shamed government leadership at every level, not just in Dubya's White House, and we citizens bore a good bit of responsibility ourselves. Achieving "resilience" — a favorite buzzword of various foundations that came down here after Katrina to save us from ourselves — has become a call to arms, albeit a sometimes vague and empty one.

After a dozen years and billions of dollars, we are not resilient. But our exposure to violent weather is somehow less perilous? We can let down our guard? Take the weekend off? In August? In the teeth of the hurricane season, is it less than criminal to have key pumping stations out of service or operating at half capacity? Shall we also relax the rules on drunk driving?

Get with it, New Orleans.

One small city can not reverse climate change, a global phenomenon — though we would be fools not to do our part in stride with thinking people around the world. Kudos to Mayor Mitch Landrieu for defying the Trump administration and pledging support for the Paris accords. Kudos to Gov. John Bel Edwards for ending his predecessor's obscene and craven pandering to the oil interests who ravaged our coast and now must be made to pay the piper.

But there's something we should take much more seriously than we have, a course of action that would amount to a sea change in how we approach the peril that surrounds us on every side. That would be to apply much more aggressively the lessons we claim to be learning from the Dutch.

God knows enough city and civic leaders and journalists enjoyed post-Katrina junkets that took us to Holland to observe their very different approach to water management. The fundamental shift would be to realize that, while our pumps and levees must be in tip-top condition at all times, [we cannot pump our way to safety](#). We can not wall out the water. Saturday's mess made a mockery of our unilateral obsession with water barriers. The enemy was within, not outside the levees.

Bear in mind, though, that the Dutch are no slouches when it comes to coastal defenses. They have not settled, as we did, for levees strong enough to resist "100-year storms." They have fortified their much more vulnerable North Sea shores against weather events expected once in 10,000 years. That's a system 100 times more "robust" than ours, to use another fashionable buzzword.

Preliminary calculations indicate that even doubling the city's pumping capacity would correct less than half the problem. We need to get just as smart and wily about water as Rotterdam. New Orleans' continued viability as a population center and commercial hub depends on it. We must learn to live with water, to absorb rainfall and storm surge in massive retention facilities, greenspaces that double as

parks. [We need to stop paving our yards](#) to make nifty little pads for the family car. We need to build absorbent rooftop gardens on as many buildings as can be put to that purpose.

Why are we building tracks for tourist trolleys instead of widening our neutral grounds to maximize their potential as green space?

Next time you're driving toward Slidell on Interstate 10, take a look at the vast swaths of tax-abated tract housing that went up along both sides of the highway after Katrina. Why, given the tax abatements, was this housing allowed to be built at ground level, rather than elevated above flood-proof parking or recreational levels? Imagine that instead of two-story ticky-tack, the residential units were consolidated in taller structures set in parkland created on the now squandered acreage.

Do we assume that the East, a scene of devastation after Katrina, will be magically spared from going underwater again? The same opportunities surrounded the makeover of our vast swaths of public housing, though here at least we have seen attention paid to more absorbent landscaping.

The New York Times ran [a good summary of the Dutch system](#) several weeks ago. It said little that hadn't already been reported by local journalists, scholars and business leaders who began trekking to Holland after Katrina. Many of the Dutch nostrums have been championed by our more enlightened environmentalists, architects and city planners.

But what have we done with that information and what have we to show for our official genuflections toward Holland? A little. Very little. We have re-opened Bayou St. John to a more natural confluence with the lake. We have created the Lafitte Greenway, a prototype of something that should be done with every canal basin and batture in the region. Now and again a building goes up that can be celebrated for its embodiment of what might be called Dutch treats: rooftop plantings, an unpaved courtyard.

But why isn't this happening urgently on a massive scale? Why are we quibbling over chains of command within a sound-asleep Sewerage & Water Board when the failure to go Dutch speaks of a citywide dysfunction?

We are spending about \$3 billion to redo our streets, with a third of that money dedicated to putting giant concrete tunnels under key arteries, to convey water out of sight and out of the city, notes David Waggonner. Waggonner is the New Orleans architect who initiated the so-called Dutch Dialogues that brought expertise from the Netherlands to post-Katrina New Orleans. In his view it is crucial that we pivot from the old paradigm of "pave, pipe and pump" and instead begin to "slow and store" water, pumping only as necessary. Reducing storm water to drainage — essentially equating it with sewerage — is "a perverse exclusion of opportunity," Waggonner believes — especially in light of the worsening subsidence problems induced by excessive and continual pumping. Preliminary calculations indicate that even doubling the city's pumping capacity would correct less than half the problem.

We could be part of that engineering and commercial juggernaut. In a sense we are — but so far our role is that of the coal mine canary. Following the Dutch Dialogues, Waggonner led creation of the

Greater [New Orleans Urban Water Plan](#), a multi-parish blueprint that looked at available public parcels and rights of way to reduce flooding and add value. The Lafitte Greenway, a part of the plan, has been used for some storm water management and flood reduction purposes, though not as profoundly as would the larger “blueway” Waggoner and the Dutch called for.

The Water Plan was central to the city’s subsequent prize-winning entry in the National Disaster Resilience Competition. Focused on the Gentilly Resilience District, the successful proposal backs selected development projects aimed at creating a more varied water system. It should also be a more visible system, says Waggoner, not one buried beneath city streets. That’s how you engage residents and other stakeholders in the mission that Waggoner and allies in the Water Collaborative, a nonprofit advocacy group, call “living with water.”

Bottom line: Waggoner sees smart water management as a way to upgrade public safety and induce investment in New Orleans. “If we want to live here,” he says, “we better figure this out.”

Amid the administrative disarray so flagrantly apparent in the aftermath of the Saturday flood and now the power station fire, I cling to one narrow basis for cautious optimism. It’s this: While Becker’s initial flurry of misleading statements about the condition and functionality of the pumping system was disgusting, it was reassuring to see that the mayor and the City Council were having none of it. In the age of Trump, a president who seems to lie almost as often as he opens his mouth, Becker’s performance gave reason to worry that mendacity was becoming standard operating procedure among public officials here as well. And so Kudos to Council Member Jim Gray for bearing down on Becker until he told the truth. At the mayor’s behest, Becker and others at the water board are now on their way out the door — hopefully never to return to the public payroll.

As the Dutch made clear to Times reporter Michael Kimmelman, their revolution in water management isn’t just a burden shouldered grudgingly by a low-lying nation. It’s an exciting challenge, a source of pride — and a source of money. Exportable water management ideas are to the Netherlands as cheese and wine are to the French, Kimmelman quipped.

The Netherlands is pioneering — and, where possible, marketing — insights, attitudes and technologies in demand around the world, as weather worsens and seas rise. There’s an irony here. A hundred years ago, when the New Orleans pumping system was considered an engineering marvel, it was the Dutch who came to us in search of guidance. Their Katrina was the horrific 1953 inundation that made water management a national purpose of existential urgency. They turned disaster into a much more trenchant learning experience than we have.

We could be part of that engineering and commercial juggernaut. In a sense we are — but so far our role is that of the coal mine canary. We are a city that should be augmenting public safety by urgently implementing the new water management paradigm. The Dutch build purposely leaky levees and marvelous parks alongside massive flood gates attuned to the rhythm of the clouds and seas.

We go chirp chirp and flutter in our cage.

Jed Horne, opinion editor of The Lens, is the author of “Breach of Faith, Hurricane Katrina and the Near Death of a Great American City (Random House, 2006, 2008) which NPR declared “the best of the Katrina books.”

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