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BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

COUNTY TO BUILD EOC TO SURVIVE ‘10,000-YEAR STORM’

Climate change, sea level rise and the future of the Keys were hot-button topics at the last BOCC meeting of the year. The recent Southeast Florida Regional Climate Leadership Summit in Key West was still fresh in everyone’s mind, including the new sea level projections of 10 to 17 inches near Key West by 2040 and 21 to 40 inches by 2070.

While the summit created a heightened awareness of the precarious position a chain of islands on porous coral rock can find itself in, more importantly, it catalyzed targeted climate adaptation measures to ensure the future of the Keys remains solid.

Municipalities in the Keys are already preparing for this “new normal,” proactively raising roads, installing injection wells, and improving stormwater plans. The county also adopted this mitigation and adaptation mindset a few years ago. The county built the Stock Island Fire Station and the Marathon library with an extra 2 feet of elevation over the code requirement, said Rhonda Haag, the county’s chief resiliency officer. “We wanted to make sure the fire station and the library wouldn’t get wet.” Haag confirmed that the county is doing the same preemptive elevation for all new buildings. “It doesn’t cost that much extra when you’re building a new building to elevate up front – just some additional concrete. But, if you wait and try to elevate it after it’s built, it’s too late and much more expensive,” she said.

With all that in mind, the BOCC set the tone at its December meeting about sea level rise. Commissioner Michelle Coldiron acknowledged the new reality in the Keys. She said, “I think we’re finally beyond the finger-pointing. We can’t stop this water, so let’s accommodate it.”

The commissioners all agreed that retrofits to old infrastructure and construction of new county buildings needed to keep the new sea level projections in mind. Talking about the life expectancy of new buildings, county administrator Roman Gastesi similarly said, “If you’re



building a building that is expected to have a 50-year lifespan, you should make sure it can withstand the conditions that we’re expecting in 50 years.”

Coldiron asked if the new, yet-to-be-built Emergency Operation Center would also be elevated.

“The EOC is a unique animal,” said assistant county administrator Kevin Wilson. “It’s being designed for a 10,000-year storm with storm surges. As sea level rises, you can anticipate 10,000-year storms to become worse, but we’re building for that.”



Commissioner David Rice agreed that elevations and solar should be the goal for future county construction but also brought up competing priorities in the present. Citing the tremendous fiscal challenges of such an ambitious adaptation strategy, he said, “This is gonna be on the backs of all of us to pay for.”

1. Monroe County Emergency Management temporarily relocated its Emergency Operations Center to Ocean Reef employee housing for staff safety just before Hurricane Irma struck the Keys on Sept. 10, 2017. A more resilient, new EOC is intended to prevent the need for relocation. MONROE COUNTY/Contributed
2. During Hurricane Irma, Monroe County's Emergency Operations Center was located at the Marathon Government Center BOCC Chambers until they had to evacuate to Ocean Reef. The new EOC building is designed to withstand 10,000-year storms, allowing EOC operations to remain in Marathon. CAMMY CLARK/Contributed