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TESTIMONY

Testimony for New Jersey Joint Environment Committee

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Good morning, Senator Smith and Senator Greenstein, members of the Senate Environment and Energy Committee, Assemblyman Eustace and Assemblyman McKeon, and members of the Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee. I thank you for inviting me to speak today.

My name is David Kutner, and I'm the planning manager at New Jersey Future, responsible for the organization's municipal outreach and assistance, with a focus on coastal communities vulnerable to sea level rise. I'm a licensed professional planner with more than 30 years of land use and environmental planning experience.

Founded in 1987, New Jersey Future is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that promotes responsible growth, redevelopment, and infrastructure investments to foster vibrant cities and towns, protect natural lands and waterways, enhance transportation choices, and provide access to safe, affordable, and aging-friendly neighborhoods to fuel a strong economy.

Today I will address the work that we have done with New Jersey communities in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, and then talk about immediate and long-term actions the state can take to prepare our communities for the consequences of climate change and sea level rise.

Since early 2013, I've overseen New Jersey Future's Local Recovery Planning Manager program, which provides ongoing direct assistance to municipalities seeking to rebuild from the devastating damage of Hurricane Sandy.

The Local Recovery Manager Program is unique compared to the various assistance efforts launched after Hurricane Sandy because we embedded professional planners in communities that were hit hard by the hurricane. Six communities participated in our program: Sea Bright and Highlands in Monmouth County; Little Egg Harbor and Tuckerton in Ocean County; and Commercial and Maurice River in Cumberland County.

Our recovery planning managers set up desks right in the town halls so they could work closely with elected officials and staff on many issues they faced in the aftermath of the storm. We continued to work with these towns for at least three years, and we're still working with some of them today, almost five years after the storm. This long-term, hands-on relationship was essential to gaining trust of local officials and community residents.

All the towns that sustained storm damage were seeking a return to normalcy: getting residents back in homes, businesses back in operation, and mountains of debris cleared from their streets. During our first program year, we worked with our participating towns to address these objectives. We were able to help them obtain over $8 million in grants for projects ranging from purchase of emergency communication equipment to installing green infrastructure, from restoring a community park to obtaining a police car.

However, we knew that eventually the towns would need to move forward from emergency response to long-term recovery, and that meant confronting vulnerability to future coastal storms and risks associated with sea level rise. Increasingly, residents in the communities we're working with acknowledge that circumstances are changing. A resident in one coastal community told me she used to enjoy the thrill of storm events; now she views them with alarm and dread, emotions clearly on display when I watched residents frantically moving cars, boats, families and neighbors as Hurricane Joaquin was bearing down on the coast in 2015.

When we started our work, we found that no municipality was prepared to respond to the damage it experienced from Sandy. In Sea Bright Borough, for example, 50 percent of the businesses were wiped out and 50 percent of the borough's residents were forced from their homes. It was months before the borough was able to contact many of the displaced families, and in some of these municipalities, residents are still not back in their houses.

But our coastal towns SHOULD have been prepared for Sandy.

On average, almost every year for the past two decades, New Jersey has experienced a presidentially-declared disaster on some part of its coast. We keep going through these experiences and we keep responding by insisting on rebuilding and returning everything to pre-storm condition as quickly as possible, without considering the inevitability of the next event. The storms are trying to tell us something but we haven't been listening.

We're now experiencing coastal risks that the state can no longer afford to ignore. Sandy was our most dramatic storm in recent memory, but it has been followed by two presidentially-declared flood-related disasters and several severe storms and nor'easters. Today, towns are experiencing recurring flooding during regular high tides. We used to shrug these occurrences off as nuisance flooding but they're not merely a nuisance when they regularly inundate ever larger areas of the coast, block emergency evacuation routes, and cause considerable property damage. Projections indicate that these conditions will grow more severe over time.

The relationships we cultivated with the towns and their residents enabled us to discuss what climate change and sea level rise would mean to their futures. In Little Egg Harbor, we worked with a steering committee for well over a year to prepare a detailed risk analysis. When that analysis was completed we asked the council to schedule public hearings so they could discuss our findings with residents of their town. It took us four months to get them just to talk about the meetings. Council members said they were very nervous about us discussing these topics with their residents, because, in one council person's

words, “it will scare the hell out of them.” In the end, however, the meetings were scheduled and very productive public discussions were conducted.

These are very difficult conversations for local officials to initiate because they fear that people will no longer invest in their town, or they will move out. And local officials have no buffer. The township administrator in Little Egg Harbor told us, “We can’t do this by ourselves. Invite state and federal agencies and other towns to join the conversation but on our own, we can’t talk to our residents about these issues.”

We need to find a way to facilitate these conversations because we can’t keep rebuilding in the 1-percent flood zone if we want resilient, thriving municipalities with sustainable tax bases. In Toms River, the valuation of land and buildings in the 1-percent flood zone is worth a staggering $4.7 billion, encompassing almost one-third of the municipality’s land area. What happens to its tax base when those properties are under water?

We can’t ignore what climate science is telling us, and we can’t ignore that our communities are unprepared for the consequences of climate change and sea level rise.

To demonstrate what communities will face in terms to which local officials could relate, we developed an analysis that translated risk into financial impact. We recognized that maps alone are not sufficient; to most people, maps are abstract representations. So we developed a parcel-based risk analysis that predicts depth of inundation throughout a community and models structural damage, in order to calculate financial exposure and tax revenue loss. This analysis enabled us to determine, for example, that by 2050, sea level rise plus a Sandy-magnitude storm would inundate 55 percent of the area of Little Egg Harbor, and the township could lose as much as 35 percent of its assessed value. That would be an economically unsustainable hit. It was at that point, with these calculations in hand, that municipal representatives finally acknowledged that we have to consider seriously how we respond to sea level rise.

To respond effectively to risk, New Jersey’s municipalities urgently need state-level direction and assistance. There are several steps the state can take to move coastal communities forward toward resiliency. These actions need to be taken now, while we have time to plan ahead, instead of waiting until we must react to conditions that will leave us with no alternatives. The state should:

1. **Assume a leadership role** in assisting coastal municipalities to implement adaptation and mitigation options;

2. **Establish uniform, forward-looking sea level rise standards and guidelines for mitigation planning**. We suggest using sea level rise projections from a report by the New Jersey Climate Adaptation Alliance Science and Technical Advisory Panel entitled ***Assessing New Jersey’s Exposure to Sea level Rise and Coastal Storms***. Just about every organization working in the field of resiliency in New Jersey is presently relying on these projections.

3. **Adopt principles set forth in President Obama's Executive Order 13960**, which encourages state, county, and local agencies to use the best available science to ensure that no critical facility is located in an area subject to current and future flood risk.

4. **Require, and provide assistance to enable, every coastal municipality to assess its risk and vulnerability to sea level rise**. These assessments need to be performed immediately because even though sea levels are rising and damage from coastal storms is becoming more severe, we still have time to plan and enact rational adaptation and mitigation strategies; and because land use changes that ensure that people and property are not in harm's way will require a long period of adjustment before they achieve successful outcomes

We also need to recognize that climate change and sea level rise will overwhelm the resources and abilities of individual municipalities to plan for them. Sea level rise and storm events don't respect municipal boundaries; they have regional impacts that demand regional response. Steps the state could take to support our communities more effectively through a regional approach could be to:

1. **Enter into broad-scale dialogue with at-risk communities.** We need to reimagine the future of the shore, how it will be used, and how current development can be shifted gradually out of harm's way. Reimagining the future of New Jersey's coast necessarily involves extensive engagement and communication with local residents, business owners, and officials to garner public support to implement necessary adaptation strategies.
2. **Adopt a regional perspective to all local planning and programs.** As I've already mentioned, adaptation cannot be implemented on a community-by-community basis. Uncoordinated individual responses (such as sea walls and bulkheads) result in unintended adverse impacts on neighboring communities. Effective risk response must encompass entire coastal areas irrespective of municipal boundaries.
3. **Consider creation of a regional resilience commission and explore development of regional revenue-sharing policies.** Regional tax-sharing was a founding principle when the Meadowlands Commission was established to protect fragile wetlands. That approach could serve as a model policy framework to balance windfalls and wipeouts and to help municipalities make the right development choices in vulnerable coastal areas.
4. **Revise the Municipal Land Use Law to require incorporation of risk and vulnerability analyses into municipal master plans.** The MLUL must be revised to address the risks of sea level rise and climate change. Towns will also need technical and financial assistance to align local land use plans and policies, zoning regulations and capital investment plans with natural hazard information mitigation and adaptation strategies.
5. **Align state programs and incentives to discourage development in areas at risk of flooding or inundation.** This could be accomplished through a rekindled state plan process.

When I first I met Mayor Dina Long of Sea Bright Borough, she was wearing her hip-high waders. She told me this was normal, the town experiences flooding on a monthly basis, waders are standard-issue borough attire. The problem stems from the fact that the borough's stormwater outfall pipes are lower than the level of the Shrewsbury River during high tides, so as the river rises, water backs up through the

collection system and floods the streets regularly. The thing is, the flooding is occurring more often and becoming more persistent. It's happening with alarming regularity in Miami, where fish are swimming in the streets during high tides, and in many coastal towns and cities along the East Coast.

The state can and should take the lead as a valuable partner to mayors like Dina who are striving to do the right thing but need support, guidance, and funding to plan an orderly transformation of their towns into communities that can be sustainable in the face of sea level rise and a changing climate. To that end, New Jersey can follow the path set by other states including Massachusetts, New York, Maryland, Delaware, Virginia and North Carolina, to name a few. We urge the members of the Joint Environment Committee to advocate for policy changes and enact legislation to protect and preserve the vital economic and environmental resources that are New Jersey's coast.

If you want to know more about the work we did in coastal communities, I have copies of our report, ***In Deep***, which is also on the New Jersey Future website. I am happy to answer questions.
Thank you very much.