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OPINION | Guest Column

Bobby Fokidis

Much of Florida is a swamp and we should take advantage of that feature as we rebuild | Column

Many consider swamps useless wastelands, but they can be a valuable ally against the effects of extreme weather.



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West Seminole Boulevard riverwalk was covered by the rising waters on Lake Monroe in Sanford on Oct. 4. The downtown Sanford area was flooding along the St. John's River as the aftereffects of Hurricane Ian were felt throughout Central Florida. [WILLIE J. ALLEN JR. | Orlando Sentinel]

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As we collectively recover from the devastation wrought by Hurricane Ian, I am reminded of how Florida was, and still is, a precarious society engineered out of a wilderness of water with the swamp as our oldest nemesis. But swamps are where water meets land, making them our ally in the fight against extreme weather.

Like any hurricane reaching U.S. shores, the commentary has now shifted from thoughts and prayers to the portrayal of Florida as a doomed 21st-century Atlantis. It's a place made possible only by pompous humans believing they can control nature through the brute force of wetland reclamation and civil engineering to allow for big money to be made from the development of private properties, often

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The advent of air-conditioning, the abundance of in-ground pools, and the availability of bug spray have helped ensure a steady stream of migrants. This history is all true, and yet development will likely continue as it always has. But as we rebuild paradise, now is the time for Floridians to consider the help of Florida's swamps.

The vulnerability of communities to hurricanes is from water unconstrained. Coastal storm surges and inland flooding from excessive rain generate the most significant proportion of any storm's economic and societal impact. Before the hotels, condos and the red roofs of Mediterranean revival homes, the coastline was a mangrove swamp ecosystem.

Uniquely native to Florida, the salt-tolerant mangrove trees (there are three distinct species) created vast saltwater forests that served as fish nurseries and vital refuges for endemic wildlife, like manatees.

Their vast entangled root structures slowed the speed of winds and storm surges, slowly distributing that energy and water across the floodplain. Estimates say a 300-foot coastal mangrove buffer can lower the height of incoming waves by as much as two-thirds, drastically decreasing inland flooding. Promoting extensive mangrove barriers beside residential communities could be a significant and sustainable buffer to storm surges.

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every square kilometer of swamp left intact. The same models predicted that the coastal swamps that were lost between 1996 and 2016 increased property damage from Hurricane Irma by \$430 million.

These facts are lost to real estate developers who have drained swamps to replace them with open-water canals. Dirt from dredging operations created mazes of waterfront properties in places where neither waterfront nor property existed before, in places like Cape Coral. In turn, regulators contest established science on flood risks and sea level rise to advance pro-growth land use policies.

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likely put more pressure on Florida’s already fragile insurance system, which has seen multiple firms go insolvent over the past two years.

Considering surge and wind speed mitigation by mangroves could incentivize their conservation by developers and could lower premiums. One can draw a direct line from how the historic loss of mangrove swamps to land developers has given rise to the current woes for insurance companies in Florida.

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Inland Central Florida succumbed to what Gov. Ron DeSantis called a “500-year flood event” (that is, a 1 in 500 chance of such flooding in a given year) as the slow-moving Ian dumped rain on an already near-saturated water table.

Cities control surface runoff through a complex and integrated system of canals, drainage, retention ponds and other flood control devices, but this infrastructure is easily overwhelmed during flash floods. Central Florida’s swamps are natural sponges that trap and slowly release waters lowering flood heights and reducing erosion. Simply put, swamps take the “flash” out of flash flooding, and in cities, like Orlando, they can counteract water runoff from impenetrable pavement and buildings by absorption.

Swamps solve many of Florida’s weather problems, yet Floridians and out-of-towners often view swamps as useless wastelands that harbor dangerous animals, stinging insects and stagnant water. People may agree that swamps have a place, just not near their property, preferring open waters shorelines instead. We continue to drain and fill swamps and then name the streets cypress road and

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collaborative of editorial boards across the state, including the Tampa Bay Times, focusing on the threats posed by the warming climate.

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