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5 thoughts about how we can stay above water



By Tony Bartelme

Since 1999, the Charleston County School District has raised \$1.34 billion to rebuild and repair our schools.

In the early 2000s, local and state officials raised more than \$640 million to build a bridge over the Cooper River.

Charleston-area leaders and residents have come together to meet big challenges. But when it comes to saving the city from rising seas and rain bombs — threats to the city's future viability — our government and business leaders so far have failed to coalesce around a vision of what to do and how to pay for it.

In this vacuum, we're in a high-stakes game of catch-up. Can anything be done to speed our city toward a better place? Scientists, planners and other experts say yes, but it will take creativity, leadership and a new sense of urgency. Here is a list of some of their ideas.

1. Explore countywide solutions

County leaders successfully crafted a vision to replace and repair its schools, navigating municipal rivalries in the process. Elected leaders could build on that success through bond referendums and similar funding mechanisms. Communities in Florida have passed climate change-related bond referendums, including Key Biscayne's \$100 million bond this November. New York put a \$3 billion bond on the ballot but pulled it before the election because of the pandemic.

2. Plant more trees now

Every mature tree sucks up about 100 gallons of water. More trees equals less stormwater. Planting more trees is a cheap and beautiful way to reduce flooding, said Karen Firehock, executive director of the Green Infrastructure Center in Virginia.

3. Create a more robust tree advocacy group

One way to boost widespread tree planting is to create a tree advocacy group. One successful model is in Charlotte, where TreesCharlotte has brought businesses and residents together to bolster that city's tree canopy. The group works with government entities but also helps private residents obtain trees. "Private property is the key because a majority of the canopy footprint is on private land," said Chuck Cole, the group's executive director. The nonprofit Charleston Parks Conservancy does have a "Charleston Trees" arm, but it's only a volunteer subcommittee.

4. Respect and protect pines

The reputations of pine trees took a hit after Hurricane Hugo in 1989 when high winds brought many pines down and snapped some in half. Some municipal tree ordinances, including Charleston's, exclude large pine trees from grand tree protections. But pines are exceptional stormwater diverters. "They have more leaf area than most trees because of all those zillions of needles, so they're really good at capturing water," Firehock said.

5. Protect more open space, especially wetlands

The Open Space Institute calculates that every dollar we spend to protect open space saves \$5 in flooding impacts. The region has invested in greenbelts, which reduce our flooding impacts. Protecting open space will only grow in importance as seas rise, said Maria Whitehead, the group's senior project manager.