Another Voice: The shoreline belongs to the water, not to developers

By Another Voice

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We would have done well to remember this. The evidence of the principle is so compelling in Western New York at this moment as we see what we call "high waters" across the Great Lakes, including our Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, causing damage to homes and businesses.

We are experiencing multiple seiches on the east end of Lake Erie, tsunami-type waves generated by high winds blowing the waters from Toledo to Buffalo, causing what functions as 7- to 10-foot tide-like condition. This will only continue as we feel the impact of climate change.

Lakes and other water bodies like rivers are not tuned to our life cycle and a shoreline is a variable space. We may have 30 years in which we can enjoy life at the edge of the water without incident, then we are shocked and distressed that our property is falling into the lake. And we have profited from the armaments built in Lake Erie to protect our cities and homes for more than 100 years.

Recent storms have damaged them; some have failed. For all our technology, science and engineering, we still live on planet Earth and if we paid just a little more attention to some basic rules, we would avoid harm to people and places.

It is useful to remember that Native Americans did not put their villages next to Lake Erie but up the Buffalo River closer to Cazenovia Park. And that before there were breakwalls and the Outer Harbor, the eastern end of Lake Erie was a massive wetland able to absorb changing lake levels and the periodic shocks of seiches. We filled in the wetlands, made new land – the Outer Harbor – along the Lake Erie shoreline out of contaminated dredge material that kept the Buffalo River open for commerce and built walls in the lake to protect our industry and investments.

We are now facing the consequences of having claimed the shorelines for ourselves. We can try to push back and build more armaments or rebuild when the levels go down. Or we can figure out how to accommodate the water's claim on the
shoreline and adjust our actions, practices and economic development to respect this principle.

It is clear that we cannot move the City of Buffalo back from Lake Erie and the Niagara River, but we can make decisions to NOT build at the shoreline or in the flood plains. We have an opportunity to make that right decision now by rejecting the proposal to build residential units at the shoreline on the Outer Harbor that will put unsuspecting residents unnecessarily in harm’s way. Is it not wiser to build residential units in the city where they can add to the life and vitality of an existing community? The shoreline belongs to the water. Let’s be grateful visitors.

Lynda Schneekloth is a member of the Sierra Club Niagara Group and Grandmother's Council.

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