



**Insider's Update: Hurricane Matthew
October 18, 2016**

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I hope this email finds you and your family and friends safe and sound after Hurricane Matthew.

The last two weeks have been eye-opening here along our coast. Between the voluntary and mandatory evacuations, watching the Weather Channel from afar, checking Facebook for updates from friends and neighbors, and waiting for permission to come home and check on the damage, all of us on Georgia's coast collectively held our breath.

After those nerve-wracking few days, many of us came home and breathed a sigh of relief. Others came back to major damage. We all returned as part of a community of people who weathered the storm and were ready to pitch in to bring our coast back to normal.

Normal.

Worried about how to support my staff and keep my family safe, I spent Tuesday and Wednesday, October 4th and 5th, watching the uncertain weather reports about where Matthew would strike. On Wednesday, Governor Deal joined his colleagues in South Carolina and Florida who had already either declared a State of Emergency or begun the evacuation process when he declared a State of Emergency for Georgia's coastal counties. It would be up to the local governments to make the call about evacuation. Glynn County's initial response was to issue a voluntary evacuation for Jekyll, St. Simons, and Sea Island. Tybee Island imposed a mandatory evacuation that same day.

Wednesday night I went to bed wondering why some appeared to be taking the storm more seriously than others, so I pulled out my laptop. That's when I realized that many of our elected officials on the coast – from local representatives to our congressmen in D.C. – were not transitioning quickly from politics to public safety. It was clear from email and Facebook communications that the storm wasn't at the front of their minds. Some were concerned about the national election, others with what their constituents would think if they issued a mandatory evacuation, and still others were thinking about their own businesses and families instead of the public they were elected to serve and protect. To their credit, many officials were communicating with their constituents, and this communication appeared to be what snapped them into public safety mode once and for all.

At 7 am on October 7, as my son Luca and I were walking our dog along the quiet streets of downtown Brunswick, the alarm on my phone sounded. While everyone was still asleep, Glynn County issued a mandatory evacuation for the county east of I-95. Chatham County did the same. As my family and I got on the road at 10:30 am, we watched our neighbors loading supplies, pets, and children into their cars just as the raindrops started to fall.

It is perhaps understandable that many of our officials have slow reflexes when it comes to storms. Most of us do. Georgia hasn't seen a major storm since the late 1890s. Unfortunately, this has led to a false sense of security – and the dangerous belief that storms, flooding, and rising seas are concerns for other states and future generations but not us. In the three and a half years since members of the OHM team began talking about coastal conservation, our comments about storm surge and sea level rise have frequently been met with the opinion that "storms don't strike Georgia's coast." Yet in the last four months, we've been visited by Hermine, Julia, and Matthew, who collectively brought more wind, surge, and rain from catastrophic weather events than we've seen in more than 100 years.

Scientists have been telling us what we haven't wanted to believe: This is the new normal.

This summer and fall should serve as a wake up call that there are only more catastrophic weather events – hurricanes or extreme high tides, tropical storms or winter lightening storms – to come. They will come more frequently and many will be stronger than we have seen. Our coast isn't at risk from these effects in some far-away future. Now is the time to prepare our communities for our new normal.

In the face of a rapidly changing climate, all of us – from everyday citizens to elected officials at the local, state, and national level – need to come together. We must prepare to keep people out of harm's way, protect our structures, strengthen our economy, and maintain the integrity of coastal Georgia's quality of life as we adapt to the new status quo.

For decades, storms have been in the back of our minds as something we knew could affect us, but most didn't think about the potential on a daily basis. Now we know. We are not immune. We have an opportunity to incorporate our recent experience (and the urgency it inspires) into our public decision-making on every level – from land use planning to infrastructure funding to land conservation. Our coastal communities have come together in amazing ways to help clean up after Hurricane Matthew, but we can do better when it comes to preparing before the next storm even happens.

As individuals, we have an important role to play. We must remember to count our blessings while simultaneously acknowledging that the next storm is right around the corner. Hermine, Matthew, and Julia threatened all of us who live in, visit, and love our coast. We need you to help us remind our elected officials that adaptation to the effects of climate change is a matter of public safety – not politics – and that this isn't a discussion we can afford to delay.

Many people in coastal Georgia think we dodged a bullet last week when Hurricane Matthew visited our coast. I think the bullet hit us, and now it is time we must address the wound.

I hope that you, your families, your homes, and all the special places you love fared well in the storm. If you have questions about OHM's work to protect Georgia's fragile and changing coastline, I'd love to hear from you.