

Maryland already is confronting the climate crisis

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) May 5, 2022



Another Earth Day has come and gone. For over 50 years we have marked April 22 as a reminder of the obligations we have to protect the environment for the benefit of all life on the planet. But here in Maryland, we don't need a date on the calendar. The signs have been all around.

Whether in the heart of Baltimore, in the state's capital, Annapolis, or in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay, we have received repeated reminders of the damages caused by the furies of Mother Nature.

Back in 2003, as the result of the remnants of Hurricane Isabel, Baltimore's Inner Harbor experienced severe flooding. The hurricane had raised the tide in the Bay by over 8 feet and caused extensive damage, including to the World Trade Center.

The waterfront tower's basement level electrical equipment was compromised, and the building had to be closed for more than a month, as tenants scrambled to find temporary space. That flooding also affected Fell's Point and severely damaged the Baltimore Museum of Industry.

According to a 2016 report by the Environmental Protection Agency, "Sea level is rising more rapidly in Maryland than in most coastal areas because the land is sinking. If the oceans and atmosphere continue to warm, sea level along the Maryland coast is likely to rise sixteen inches to four feet in the next century. As sea level rises, the lowest dry lands are submerged and become either tidal wetland or open water."

Holland Island, once inhabited by watermen and farmers, is already lost to the waters of the Bay, it's last house (constructed in 1888) having collapsed in 2010. Smith Island is not in immediate danger of being submerged, but the long-term outlook is not promising.

Those in Ellicott City have particular reason to be mindful of the challenges posed by raging waters. In July 2016, torrential rain soaked that historic mill town, causing flash floods that swept down Main Street, wiping out storefronts, smashing vehicles, and killing two people. Some store owners rebuilt; others decided to leave.

Less than two years later, in May 2018, another disastrous storm hit the town, wrecking roads, buildings and causing one fatality. By then, the term "1,000-year storm" had lost its meaning. Howard County has secured \$60 million in funding for its Safe and Sound Plan and related flood mitigation projects to deal with the worst effects of future storms.

Future challenges

Annapolis is another community that has had to deal with recurrent incidents of coastal flooding. The Annapolis City Dock is the historic heart of this onetime colonial seaport, now a destination for the many visitors to the area. According to the Bay Journal, portions of the City Dock are underwater 50–60 days a year, compared to three or four days a year a half-century ago, when Earth Day was first observed.

Annapolis has just launched an ambitious \$50 million project intended to provide essential flood protection immediately adjacent to the town's long, narrow boat basin. The project calls for raising the dock walkway, building a new flood wall and installing a retractable barrier in order to provide a total of 8 feet of protection above the current sea level.

“What’s happening here is not just a pilot for Maryland but also a demonstration project for the rest of the country,” said Nicholas Redding, president and CEO of Preservation Maryland. “Anywhere you go in the world, historic resources sit at the water’s edge. So, we have to figure out ways to protect those resources, particularly those affected by an ever-changing climate and sea level rise.”

Responses elsewhere

Indeed, cities elsewhere in America and places across the globe are confronting similar issues and responding in innovative ways. These include:

- Chicago, where in response to regular flooding of its stormwater system, the city has become an early adopter of green stormwater infrastructure and urban vertical farms.
- Rotterdam in the Netherlands, which has taken to “waterscaping” — creating green spaces within the urban setting in order to absorb rainfall and ease the stress on the sewage system.
- Tokyo, which has been modifying its subways in anticipation of increased urban flooding. It has installed large water reservoirs underground and placed rain shields at the entrance of train stations.

Seeing the challenges and appreciating the risks of inaction, the global community has to ensure that Earth Day is every day.

Joe Nathanson is the retired principal of Urban Information Associates, a Baltimore-based economic and community development consulting firm. Since 2001, he has written a monthly column for The Daily Record and can be contacted at urbaninfo@comcast.net