

FOREGROUND



GALVESTON, TEXAS

Optimistic plans embrace community ideas while addressing sea-level rise, in *NOW*, page 18.



LEFT
At a workshop in 2019, participants explored potential public uses for the Galveston seawall.

sits less than five feet above the high tide mark. In October 2020, to address the city's vulnerability to sea-level rise and storm-related flooding, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Texas General Land Office released the Coastal Texas Protection and Restoration Feasibility Study. Among its recommendations are massive flood gates between Galveston and Bolivar islands and a concrete ring barrier around much of the former, along with 43 miles of constructed or restored sand dunes.

GALVESTON SHALL NOT BE MOVED

**A VISION PLAN FOR THE
GULF COAST CITY CENTERS
ON COMMUNITY NEEDS.**

BY TIMOTHY A. SCHULER

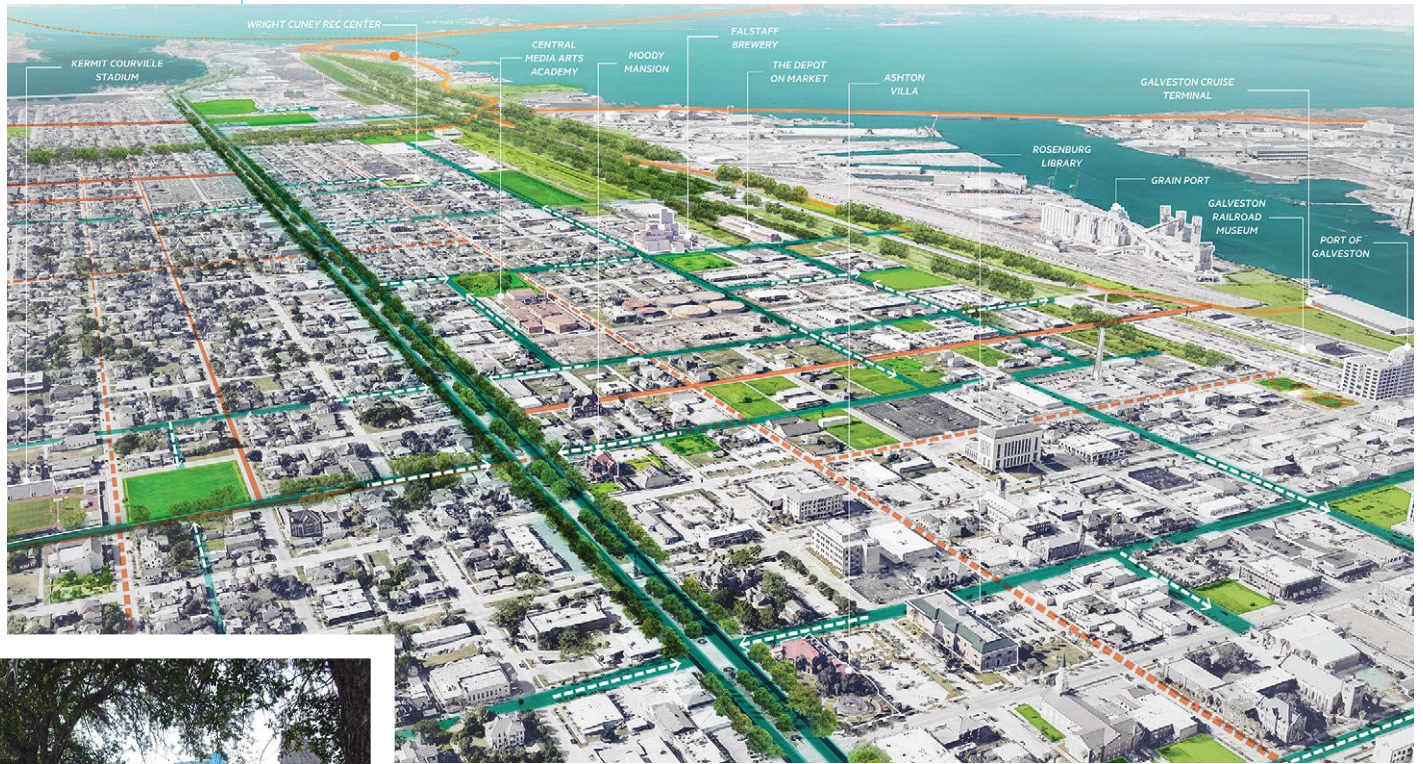
“We have not been forward-thinking in terms of how we use space. Just look at the seawall,” says Keath Jacoby, the executive director of Vision Galveston, a nonprofit organization serving the Texas Gulf Coast community. “It’s a utilitarian structure that was built [more than] 100 years ago, and we just use it as a piece of concrete. It could be so much more.”

Jacoby’s statement, referring to Galveston’s 10-mile-long seawall, first constructed in 1904, exemplifies the determined optimism and strategic thinking that animates the nonprofit organization’s efforts to preserve and improve open space in the community and to use it to reduce the threat of flooding.

Just 1 percent of Galveston lies more than 15 feet above sea level. The vast majority of the barrier island, including the bulk of the city’s urban core,

Despite the use of natural systems, the plan has met opposition from a range of experts and community members, not least for the way in which the plan seemed to sacrifice Galveston for the benefit of cities like Houston. “Galveston is both at risk itself and acting as protection for others,” says Amy Whitesides, ASLA, a director at Stoss Landscape Urbanism, which worked with Vision Galveston on a long-range plan for the city. “My sense was that the islanders didn’t really feel that they had an ability to have input.”

Vision Galveston, while admittedly not addressing flood risk at the same scale as the Army Corps of Engineers, is taking a very different approach. The organization was formed in 2018 by a consortium of local philanthropic foundations with a goal of creating a strategic and equitable framework for future planning and development in Galveston. In 2019, Vision Galveston hired Stoss, Huitt-Zollars, Asakura Robinson, January Advisors, and Mass Economics to create a plan that was representative of the community. The organization set—and the team met—a target of talking to at least 15 percent of the island’s total population, or



TOP
More than a third of Vision Galveston's recommendations address open space, ecology, or resilience.

INSET
Two high-need public parks in Galveston are serving as sites for demonstration projects.

8,500 people, more than the number of residents who typically turn out to vote, Jacoby says.

The result is an all-encompassing, 418-page vision that positions the Galveston of 2040 as a more livable, walkable, and equitable community and a center of coastal resilience innovation. Twenty-eight of the plan's 78 recommendations have to do with open space, ecology, or resilience in some way, including the proposed creation of a local review board to evaluate current and future coastal resilience plans such as the one by the corps. Community members also took part in a "Build Your Seawall" session, in which they used 3-D-printed models to explore the potential multifunctionality of the existing seawall.

Conspicuously absent from Vision Galveston is any mention of managed retreat. Though the

plan looks squarely at the threat of sea-level rise, its tone and overall vision for Galveston's future is one of hope. "We used this phrase, 'mobilizing optimism,'" Jacoby says. "I still live by it. We can focus on the negative and the detractors, or we can spend our time mobilizing those who know they want to do good things."

The plan was completed in October 2019 and has spawned two initiatives—BUILD Galveston and GREEN Galveston—to address the community's most prominent concerns: a lack of affordable housing and persistent nuisance flooding. Community-based efforts may not be able to replace large-scale mitigation strategies, but in cataloging the community's concerns, Vision Galveston could inform what is eventually built, says Katie Coyne, a principal at Asakura Robinson. "I think the biggest thing that Vision Galveston can bring to the table is making sure that the new infrastructure system doesn't further disconnect the people of Galveston from nature." ●

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