



Coastal reforestation: Plant a tree, save a life

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As the one-year anniversary of Superstorm Sandy arrives, with rebuilding still very much in progress, especially in the coastal communities that were hit the hardest, we have to ask ourselves: if another storm were to strike tomorrow, would we fare any better?

Walter Meyer and Jennifer Bolstad of Local Office Landscape Architecture (LOLA) have spent the last year working tirelessly to make sure the answer is "yes." In the days after Sandy, LOLA was instrumental in providing the first hotspots of solar power to the ravaged Rockaways. Since then, they have poured over mountains of data from before, during, and after the storm to develop a plan of coastal resilience. The key? Strategic reforestation.

The live-saving power of trees was clearly demonstrated during Sandy. In the September article, "Rising Seas," National Geographic wrote about a home in the Rockaways that was saved, along with the lives of everyone inside, by a cluster of pine trees that deflected a massive chunk of boardwalk. Further down the beach, one dune full of trees saved an entire historic district of bungalows.

But protective coastal reforestation is far more complex than just planting a few trees, as Meyer and Bolstad explained at Pratt Institute on Oct. 16th. Each dune needs a specific combination of deciduous trees, evergreens, and beach grasses to create the strongest possible root structures for optimal defense. The dunes themselves need to be carefully placed to ensure they don't protect one block by endangering another.

Natural disasters do not respect the division of public and private property, so it's unsurprising that LOLA's plan requires planting on both public and private lands for effective coverage. The public double dune system - a primary dune along the beach to be covered with beach grass, and a secondary dune of trees along the eastern two lanes of Shore Front Pwy. - secured backing from mayor Bloomberg's SIRR report and the N.Y.C. parks dept.

Planting a final line of defense on private lands, though, means navigating the political landscape between the dozen-plus insular neighborhoods that make up the Rockaways. It also means getting businesses and homeowners to sacrifice their first-floor sea views, which drew many residents to the Rockaways in the first place. Any holdouts could make the system much more difficult to implement.

Remarkably, the communities have thus far shown incredible support for the reforestation. I felt that support for myself earlier this month, when I led a team of volunteers from Rapid Realty to take part in two plantings alongside the Rockaway Waterfront Alliance, one of several organizations working to put the urban coastal reforestation plan into action. Other plantings have been coordinated by groups like the Surfrider Foundation and reTREET America, which is doing another round on Nov. 2.

The hope is that what begins in the Rockaways can be replicated in other vulnerable coastal

communities like Red Hook, Staten Island, and the Jersey Shore. Reforestation is not an overnight process, but with sea levels rising and the next storm always on the horizon, planting a tree today could save a life tomorrow.

Interested in joining us for a planting? Email rapidgreen@rapidnyc.com.

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