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Don't forget the wrath of Sandy

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Nearly three years have passed since superstorm Sandy battered Long Island. It changed us, for better and for worse. It made us more aware of our vulnerability and more thoughtful about it. At the same time, its reverberations continue to haunt us.

Too many homes still are empty. Too many homeowners still have not been made whole. Too many important projects have not been started. And the sublime dysfunction of the Federal Emergency Management Agency again has been exposed.

Every day seems to bring another report of another municipality razing or repairing something Sandy wrecked, shoring up something Sandy weakened, fortifying something for the next Sandy. Damaged houses are being elevated. Some are being auctioned off. Others are being demolished and the property returned to wetlands.

And beyond each of these concrete actions lies something far more profound: lives forever changed.

It's not just the way we were altered materially -- the more than \$8 billion in damage the region suffered and the stuff we owned that's now gone. It's the way Sandy changed how Long Island thinks of itself.

We're different. Now we see the threat posed by fierce storms and by the environmental degradation we've caused. Now we get it. And now we're paying attention to things we should have been minding all along. That's Sandy's silver lining.

The word "resiliency" is a part of our vocabulary in a way it never was before. More of us worry about our coastal marshlands, understand how they can help protect us from the fury of angry waves, and discuss the role that nitrogen plays in destroying them.

Before Sandy, how many people knew about ocean outfall pipes for sewage treatment plants? How many were talking -- seriously -- about how sewers and high-tech septic systems could affect our coastal defenses? More important, how many were listening?

But now we're in the action phase, actually trying to rebuild and strengthen. And that's where things could get scary. Because this is hard work. It's going to take a long time and a lot of money, and we cannot lose focus.

So where are we, nearly three years since that awful October night? Fire Island's dune restoration still hasn't started, and won't be completed for at least another 18 months. The

beach-protection plan in Montauk is stuck in state court in a battle over how best to protect a fragile community. There still is no funding plan for a pipe to carry effluent from the Bay Park sewage plant out to the Atlantic Ocean instead of Reynolds Channel, where millions of gallons of raw sewage were dumped after Sandy walloped the plant.

And it wasn't until last week -- long after reports emerged of Long Island homeowners being denied Sandy insurance claims because of fraudulent engineering reports -- that the new director of FEMA's troubled flood insurance program said the welfare of disaster victims will become more of a priority. We'll see.

Progress, in other words, has been slow. Look at our problem with brown tides. They're fueled by the same nitrogen that kills our marshlands, weakening our natural defenses against storm surges like Sandy's. We know brown tides are bad, but a new one is back in the Great South Bay, 30 years after they first appeared on Long Island.

Let's face it -- we've been lucky another Sandy has not hit. We cannot lose the sense of urgency that engulfed us on Oct. 29, 2012, along with those winds and floodwaters. Attention spans can be brief. Leaders come and go. But elected officials and regular residents alike need to keep pushing to make sure it all gets done.

This is one task on which we simply cannot fall short.

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