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Shoreline Preservation Panel Battles The Elements

Attorney lends expertise to task force looking at storm, erosion and sea level issues

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Connecticut's shoreline has long been a victim of erosion. Rising sea levels and ongoing development have slowly eaten away at the miles of shoreline that rest between prime real estate and Long Island Sound. But when Storm Irene hit in August, the devastation was unprecedented; beaches were wrecked and waterfront homes washed away.

As a member of the Connecticut General Assembly's newly created Climate Change and Shoreline Preservation Task Force, Hartford attorney Joseph Williams hopes to use his expertise to alleviate some of the pressure on the state's 300-plus miles of jagged coastline. A partner in Shipman & Goodwin's real estate, environmental and land use practice, Williams represents businesses, developers, property owners and municipal-

ities in permitting proceedings and litigation.

"One of the things I like most about working in this area is the public nature of the business, given the strong interest people have in decisions that affect their communities," Williams said. He also likes the "interesting variety of scientific, policy and legal issues that we address on a daily basis."

The Connecticut coastline runs through many communities, and Williams said the issues are complex and numerous. He's already learned a lot about the geological changes that can affect not only shoreline, but people and their quality of life.

"Beach erosion has been a big problem and was severe in many coastal towns as a result of Storm Irene," Williams said. "But the more troublesome long-term issue is sea level rise. Scientists tell us that sea rise is a certainty, but the rate and magnitude are



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uncertain. Along with climate change, it will worsen the severity and frequency of storm surges. There is currently debate within our state about the most desirable methods of preserving the shoreline, such as armoring versus 'softer' structures." The armoring could include jetties, seawalls or bulkheads to lessen

the effects of erosion.

Williams said task force members have a long list of priorities, including studying data on sea level rise and climate change, reviewing permitting processes and governance issues, suggesting engineering solutions to stabilize private property and informing and involving the public and specific shoreline stakeholders.

Other task force members say Williams is a valuable contributor.

“Joe’s the only attorney on the panel who’s not in politics, and that makes him unique to the panel,” said John Plante, a civil engineer on the task force who has known Williams for several years. “His legal expertise in dealing with [environmental] issues is what is valuable to the panel. And his passion for this topic is what brought him to the task force.”

Williams lives in Glastonbury, along the Connecticut River.

But he said even those who live well away from the water will be affected by climate change, rising sea levels and increased frequency and intensity of storms. “I think every citizen of the state should be concerned about it,” he said. “If we don’t make good decisions and smartly, and learn to adapt, then safety becomes an issue.”

Williams said the coastline is not only a haven for those fortunate enough to live near the wa-

The devastation caused by Storm Irene was unprecedented, but there are other less dramatic factors jeopardizing the state’s shoreline.



ter, but it also provides jobs and recreation for people who don’t live there. Toward that end, Williams said the most disturbing impact he has seen from Storm Irene was the loss of bathing facilities and the boardwalk at Hammonasset Beach State Park and the damage to Cozy Beach in East Haven. “There were devastating losses of beachfront towns,” he said.

The whys and hows of those losses are what keeps Williams going.

“The subjects we are grappling with offer a perfect confluence of my practice areas and a complex mix of science, engineering, economics, politics and law. That is why I am excited to be a member of this task force,” Williams said. “I have represented businesses, individual property owners and municipalities along the shore and dealt with the Coastal Management Act. More broadly, I work every day on development proposals requiring land use decision-making that implicates a host of competing considerations and interests.

This experience makes the task force’s subjects highly relevant and immediate to me.”

Enacted in 1980, the goal of the Connecticut Coastal Management Act is to ensure balanced growth along the coast, restore coastal habitat, improve public access, protect public trust waters and submerged lands and promote harbor management and facilitates research. It is administered by the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. The 19-member task force, headed by state Representative James Albis, D-East Haven, is empowered to suggest amendments to the act.

“Representative Albis was looking for a legal practitioner having experience with the statutes and regulatory programs related to the task force’s subject areas as well as permitting along the shoreline,” Williams said. “I was glad to answer the call.”•