STATE SHOULD RESTRICT SHORELINE REBUILDING: OP-ED

When I first visited Dock & Dine, a notable waterfront restaurant in Old Saybrook, I was struck by its extreme exposure to Long Island Sound, the fury of river flooding, coastal storms and shifting sands. It leans into the nor'easters coming off the Sound at the mouth of the Connecticut River, New England's most flood-prone major river.

Beginning in the 1940s, this overgrown clam shack became a fortress of real estate: raised by artificial fill, guarded by a massive sea wall and surrounded by asphalt pavement at 4.5 feet above sea level.

Wondering whether it survived Superstorm Sandy, I returned last year. As I suspected, it was a disaster zone. The restaurant was closed and cordoned off. The sea wall was damaged. The lot was covered by patches of storm-tossed gravel.

Demolish & Defend is what's happening now. The 20th century restaurant is being torn down to make room for a 21st century citadel with 10,000 square feet of dining space and even better views. This replacement is being built on a foundation supported by deep concrete piers rising to 15 feet above sea level. Below this, the first-floor walls will break away when being slammed by walls of water.

"Dumb & Dumber" is the movie that comes to mind when I think about the government policy that declares war against the sea, rather than providing incentives to help residents move out of the way. Based on NASA satellite telemetry, the rate of global sea-level rise has nearly doubled since the restaurant was first built, to about 0.12 inches a year.

It's not the patrons and owners of Dock & Dine who are being dumb and dumber. They're responding appropriately to the existing economic and regulatory incentives. My frustration is with the federal, state and town authorities responsible for creating misguided incentives. Instead of regulatory tough love, they're yielding to acute pressure and deferring long-term costs to the next generation.

Sadly, this blatant hardening of our beaches is -- lot by lot -- turning the Connecticut shoreline into a wall of privately owned buildings blocking the view for the rest of us. Someday, this artificially elevated concrete shoreline will resemble higher versions of the artificial breakwaters protecting our harbors today. Shorelines will have become peninsulas, if not islands.

This case history illustrates the one-dimensionality of Connecticut's coastal management policy. When threatened by too much water, we are urged to go upward, forgetting that for every vertical increment of natural sea-level rise, there is usually a much larger horizontal increment of landward shoreline migration.

Such horizontal migration is what brought the present shoreline to Saybrook Point from somewhere now far offshore. Much of Long Island Sound was once a broad patch of dry and dusty land with streams draining across it, soil that has since been inundated by the sea.

This horizontal component of shoreline change also explains why the brown peat of former salt marshes is commonly exposed below beaches at low tide. About 6,000 years ago, sea level in Long Island Sound was at least 30 feet below what it is today. Since then, many beaches have migrated a mile or more across the land, riding up and over the salt marshes of the past and creating new marshes ahead of the relentlessly rising tide.
Unfortunately, our system of property ownership is based on fixed geographic coordinates rather than fixed environmental conditions. Owners can't migrate with the conditions, such as surfers on a good wave. Instead, they stand their ground with an escalating series of defensive moves. The Hail Mary play is to go upward on concrete stilts, letting the environment pass beneath them.

William Shakespeare saw the futility of going up. In Sonnet 64 he wrote of the natural "interchange of state" between the "hungry ocean" of coastal erosion and the "firm soil" winning back the "watery main" by deposition. In celebration of his 450th birthday, I suggest we make a strategic retreat from the sea.