



Houston's Lack Of Zoning Laws Didn't Make Harvey More Damaging, Experts Say

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Media pundits and urban planners have zeroed in on Houston's lacking of zoning laws as a culprit for extreme flooding in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, but some experts are cautioning against buying into the hype.

"Urban planners want people to believe that their one-size-fits-all density solution will solve every problem, when in fact it creates more problems than it solves," Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, told The Daily Caller News Foundation.

"We went through a similar debate after Katrina," said O'Toole, an expert on urban planning and transportation issues.

Harvey made landfall as a Category 4 hurricane Friday night. Rescuers have evacuated thousands of people from flooded homes, and at least 44 people have died. Urban planning experts and activists were quick to put some of the blame on Houston's lack of zoning laws.

Numerous media reports pointed to Houston's urban sprawl as a major problem for flooding, increasing the amount of "impermeable" surfaces that can make flooding worse. Concrete, asphalt, brick and other artificial surfaces keep water from being absorbed into the ground.

Texas A&M professor Sam Brody is quoted in several media accounts of Houston's lack of zoning laws. Zoning laws more tightly control how cities can develop and grow, and account for things like flood management.

Brody told NPR that "all of that impervious surface makes it very difficult for the water to drain into the soil. Instead, it runs into the bayous and, in this case, into people's homes." Harvey dumped 50 inches of rain over Houston.

Impervious surfaces create runoff from rainfall, which needs somewhere to go or else you get bad flooding. Pundits say Houston's flood highlights the need for more "green spaces" in cities to mitigate flooding.

Brody also pointed to the city's aging flood infrastructure and weak land management regulations. Many of these concerns were laid out in a 2015 article by ProPublica and the Texas Tribune on Houston's lack of preparedness for a major storm.

O'Toole pushed back against those claims, authoring a blog post debunking the notion that zoned cities are better at reducing impermeable surfaces than non-zoned Houston.

“If Houston is going to do anything, it should require people building in potential flood zones to get flood insurance so they don't become dependent on federal and state disaster aid,” O'Toole said.

“Anything more than that is unnecessary and counterproductive to Houston's economic growth and stability,” he said.

Houston also has numerous land use regulations that act like zoning laws. They may not be as strict as New Orleans or New York City, but both those cities have experienced extremely devastating flooding in recent years as well.

At the end of the day, no amount of permeable space could have done much to mitigate the 25 trillion gallons of water dumped on southeastern Texas and Louisiana. For comparison, Chesapeake Bay holds 18 trillion of water.

In fact, Houston has more impermeable surfaces, like grass and other green spaces, than heavily zoned major cities, according to a Cato Institute analysis.

“Houston has substantially less impervious surfaces covered by buildings, roads, and parking lots (39.2%) and substantially more absorbent surfaces with trees, grasses, and soils (60.6%) than similarly populated American cities,” Cato urban policy expert Vanessa Brown Calder wrote in a blog post.

“New Orleans and New York City experience hurricane and flood risks, and both have more impervious surface cover than Houston despite conventional planning and zoning,” Calder wrote.

What Houston planners currently regulate, like parking requirements, minimum lot size, and paved easement requirements, drive impervious surface cover up, not down,” Calder wrote.

“The idea that more zoning is a solution to Houston's Harvey problem is wishful thinking,” she wrote.