

Can She Keep Miami Beach Above the Rising Sea?

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WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Scientists research and politicians make laws, but officials like her are where the rubber meets the (raised) road.

Susanne Torriente didn't discover her life's passion on a Florida beach, embraced by blue-green waters. Her epiphany happened in one of the least glorious settings possible: the halls of county government.

It was 2008. Miami-Dade County had hired an expert to help the area adapt to a changing environment. The problem was no one could understand what the expert was saying. When someone complained to Torriente's boss, he looked up through his reading glasses at his desk and airily assured them, "Don't worry about it. Susy will supervise this." Her first reaction: "Why me?" Her second: "Why not?"

Torriente, 51, soon realized being a first responder to climate change would be the most important work she would ever do. Today, as assistant city manager and chief resiliency officer for the city of Miami Beach, she's leading the rising seas response at ground zero for climate change in the U.S. — as cities are innovating to solve a problem the federal government and many states are too paralyzed to tackle.

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Susanne Torriente

Local governments forecast sea level rise in the range of 2 1/2 feet to more than 6 feet by the year 2100. The city is fighting back with a multiyear plan that could cost up to \$650 million. That includes raising roads — with about eight miles elevated to date and another 78 expected to be in the future — adding new stormwater pump stations, raising seawalls and other measures.

Torriente and her colleagues have attracted international attention for how their work might be replicated elsewhere; she has traveled to South Africa to help leaders there develop a regional climate response. Other leaders are eager to learn how Torriente has pushed to integrate climate considerations into the city's land use codes, zoning and even its procurement policy — which favors vendors who prioritize sustainability. If you think it should be easy to modernize local government functions this way, you probably haven't renewed your driver's license lately.

Vicki Arroyo, executive director of the Georgetown Climate Center in Washington, D.C., considers Torriente a visionary for her ability to make change happen, particularly when the steps “are not always easy or sexy, frankly.” Understanding the latest science is key, but “the harder work is translating it into policy action. That's what her talent is and what more people need to be doing at all different scales, both in this country and abroad.”

Torriente grew up loving the ocean. Born in New York City to Cuban parents, she moved to Miami when she was 7. Her mom showed her how to be a pioneer by working as a banker at a time when Hispanic women in the industry were rare. Torriente stayed close to home, earning a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Miami, then a master's in public administration.

Note the lack of a science degree. “I'm grateful every day for that path I took,” she says. “It helps me be in a room with scientists and engineers, people who are so smart but trained in one track. What I bring to the table is the ability to break things down into smaller pieces, and I can question and probe. That's my contribution to working in these interdisciplinary teams. I'm not an engineer. I'm not a scientist. But I know how to pull the best out of them.”

Such knowledge was an asset in 2015, when a science committee from the four-county Southeast Florida Regional Climate Change Compact — a group Torriente co-founded, which has been praised by former President Barack Obama as “a model not just for the country, but for the world” — issued sea level rise projections. Torriente pressed the group on how they would translate the science so local engineers and planners could understand and use it, and talked with those audiences about what they needed. The result: guiding documents in

accessible language. The accomplishment is all the clearer when compared to, say, North Carolina, where the legislature once responded to a forecast of sea level rise by passing a law to forbid its use in setting policy.



Art deco buildings line Ocean Drive in South Beach, Miami.

Source [Leslie dela Vega/OZY](#)

This year promises to be big for Torriente. With her staff, she's convened a team of architects, scientists and engineers to devise ways to protect Miami Beach's famed art deco and midcentury modern buildings against flooding and climate change. Some historic buildings may need to be prioritized because it's possible not all can be saved. "That has to be a very public process," Torriente acknowledges, knowing it will be emotional for everyone who loves the city. Recommendations will draw upon data and what local citizens say about the places they value most.

Some analysts claim the city is doomed and its architectural jewels should be moved inland. Torriente finds those views frustrating. "I don't really like when people talk about just picking up your toys and leaving," she says. "That's really not the way to manage the issue." She

doesn't dwell on what lies ahead a century from now, but on "manageable chunks of time, where you can actually think about what can be done, find the right dollars, make the right investments and adapt."

The city's efforts have their critics. A citizens group, We Love Lakeview, is protesting a plan to raise roads in their neighborhood, worried about water drainage onto their land and property values. Miami Beach Commissioner Mark Samuelian agrees the city must respond to sea level rise but has concerns about what he calls "our one-size-fits-all policy of every street being raised," both for the cost and the possible adverse effects on neighborhoods. The city has hired an outside firm to develop a sea level rise mitigation and stormwater strategy that will look at the street-raising policy, but also many other areas, such as ways to improve the aesthetics of a city while managing stormwater.



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Source [Leslie dela Vega/OZY](#)

In a high-stakes job, Torriente says her Catholicism helps center her, along with homespun interests: reading, cooking, family, Mickey Mouse. Yes, really — her wife, a Disney executive, can get free passes for the couple at Disney parks, and Torriente calls herself a “huge fan” of Walt’s favorite rodent. That makes it somewhat surprising to hear her admit, “I have a soft side, but I don’t like to show it.” A high school teacher once told Torriente’s mom that her daughter would make a good poker player.

Torriente believes the work to adapt to climate change will never be finished in Miami Beach. But she’s not intimidated, and she’s not big on trying to terrify people into action either. The city might look different in the future, she says, but that doesn’t mean it will be any less appealing. “Sometimes I tell my staff, ‘We’re working toward the city of tomorrow. Don’t be afraid of that. That can be a cool thing.’” She pauses. Her voice comes back strong. “It is a cool thing.”

OZY’s 5 Questions With Susanne Torriente

- **What’s the last book you finished?** *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng — I love a good novel with character development.
- **What do you worry about?** I am not a big “worrier” actually. I like to get all the facts and address issues that I can control. And for the issues outside of my control, [I] seek solace in my faith.
- **What’s the one thing you can’t live without?** Probably a nice glass of wine with dinner.
- **Who’s your hero?** My mother.
- **What’s one item on your bucket list?** I don’t have a bucket list. I live every day to the fullest and take any opportunity to travel.

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