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An aerial photograph of Miami Beach, Florida, showing a long strip of land with high-rise buildings, a marina, and a beach. The water is a vibrant blue-green. In the background, the city skyline is visible across the water. The text is overlaid on the bottom right of the image.

**COASTAL MIAMI BEACH IS ON THE FRONT
LINES OF THE CLIMATE-CHANGE FIGHT**

SUN-SOAKED MIAMI BEACH IS A GOOD PLACE TO BE optimistic. And while a tax hike to fund infrastructure upgrades is rarely a winning campaign strategy, Philip Levine had a hunch it could work when he ran for mayor three years ago. Streets in the seaside city regularly flood with several feet of water during the highest tides, and scientists say the problem will only worsen as climate change raises sea levels as much as 7 ft. by the end of the century. Against such prospects, Levine's \$500 million plan to end the regular knee-high flooding seemed like a bargain to voters. "Some people say you get swept to office," says Levine. "I always say I got floated into office."

Since the election, Miami Beach has embarked on an aggressive—and expensive—plan to defend against climate

change that rivals the engineering feat that created some of its beaches from landfill a century ago. But Miami Beach is not alone. Across a four-county region in South Florida, officials are working together to defend against rising sea levels, crossing party lines and bucking state leaders in the process. This bipartisan, intercity collaboration—formally known as the Southeast Florida Regional Climate Compact—has the potential to serve as a model for vulnerable coastal communities across the nation.

Members of the compact share ideas and practices but implement them in their own way. On a tour of Miami Beach in late spring, public-works director Eric Carpenter points to construction crews tearing up roads to rebuild them as much as 2.5 ft. higher. The city, it seems, is elevating: alfresco restaurant diners now eat at eye level with feet pacing the adjacent sidewalk, and electrical boxes that control the pumping systems will be raised as much as 8 ft. off the ground to account for worst-case projections.

In Miami-Dade County, officials are taking a less drastic tack, gradually adapting infrastructure

rather than spending billions to overhaul everything at once. So far, the county has integrated climate-change contingencies into a multi-billion-dollar upgrade of its water and sewage facilities, with plans to raise building elevations and install new electrical systems above ground floors. Those measures would have cost billions on their own, but add only \$75 million when combined with existing projects.

Triage is the word in Coral Gables, where Republican Mayor James Cason has told lawyers and planners to figure out which infrastructure can be saved and which can be relocated. “Pick your level of risk, and plan for what you believe in,” he says.

SEA LEVEL isn't the only obstacle for planners. The administration of Florida Governor Rick Scott, a climate-change skeptic, has reportedly banned some officials from even uttering the phrase, though Scott has denied such a policy. Others believe in climate change but think the region may be a lost cause. Harold Wanless, a geology professor at the University of Miami, predicts that Miami Beach will be underwater by the

end of the century, leading to a Dust Bowl–like migration. “We’re going to have a bunch of Okies from South Florida,” he says.

Scientists who study sea-level rise agree Miami is in trouble, but just how much is unclear. Estimates of sea-level rise for the end of the century range from around 2.5 ft. to nearly 7 ft. And because South Florida sits on a porous limestone plateau, levees like those used in New Orleans or Amsterdam won’t work—the water would simply be forced below ground.

What’s clear, however, is that doing nothing, long the default approach of many waterfront cities, is no longer an option in Miami Beach. A place that a century ago was little more than a sliver of land amid

swamps and mangroves now teems with highways and high-rises. Area homes—the closer to the water the better—are selling for record prices, and dozens of gleaming skyscrapers are under construction.

To Wayne Pathman, incoming chair of the Miami Beach chamber of commerce, all this development presents an opportunity to rebuild the region bigger, better and stronger. Dealing with the reality of climate change, in a strange way, can be a catalyst.

“Somewhere in the second grade, there’s a kid who will invent the next solution,” he says. “If you’re a pessimist, you’ll always be a pessimist.” And as Mayor Levine knows, pessimists have no place in Miami Beach. □