

# Know Your Risk

*A Home-Buyer's Guide to Asking Smart Questions  
about Tidal Flooding*



Union of  
[ Concerned Scientists

Within the lifetime of a 30-year mortgage issued today, more than 300,000 American homes with a market value of about \$120 billion could be at risk of chronic, disruptive tidal flooding—experiencing 26 or more tidal floods every year—as sea levels rise, according to the report *Underwater: Rising Seas, Chronic Floods, and the Implications for the US Coastal Real Estate*. You can read the report and view maps at [www.ucsusa.org/underwater](http://www.ucsusa.org/underwater).

Purchasing a home is a big investment. If you are considering buying one in a coastal community, get informed about the potential tidal flood risk. Many homebuyers and sellers mistakenly assume that federal flood risk maps (FEMA maps) and “flood certifications” obtained by mortgage lenders during the home-buying process provide complete information. But these maps are only a starting point. They can be out of date and do not capture tidal flood risks, current or future.

Remember that, even though the threat may not be visible today, it is growing in many locations as sea levels rise. When tidal flooding begins to disrupt everyday life, property values in those places will likely decline. Consider putting the same effort into learning about tidal flooding risks as you would put into researching the school system, crime rates, and other community characteristics that will have a long-term impact on your property value.

## Ask Yourself

***What is my risk, and what is my tolerance for risk?***

- The professionals who assist you in purchasing a home—mortgage loan officers, brokers, attorneys, insurance brokers, appraisers, and home inspectors—may only be legally required to consult FEMA flood maps to cover their own liability risk and will not ordinarily consider the risk of future sea level rise to your home.
- Currently, it’s on you as the homebuyer to take the initiative to assess tidal flooding risks, including by talking to local experts and consulting free or fee-based mapping products.
- If the property you’re considering is in an area at growing risk of tidal flooding, consider how falling property values will affect your long-term financial goals.

## Ask the Locals

***Are you aware of any areas flooding now? How often? Do people have trouble getting to work or school? Do access roads for this neighborhood flood during extreme tides?***

- Current (and future) property values could be affected by flooding elsewhere in the neighborhood or the flooding of critical infrastructure, so

try to assemble a clear picture of the whole community.

- Investigate whether the neighborhood relies on a sea wall, levee system, tide gate, or other type of flood defense measure. Keep in mind, these measures are not fail-safe.
- Even if an individual home is safe from flooding, important infrastructure like roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, and water and power utilities may not be. Flooded roads, for example, can make neighborhoods inaccessible, including by emergency vehicles.

## Ask the Seller, the Realtor, and Town Planner's Office

*Is this home or neighborhood at risk of high-tide flooding? Has there been damage as a result? How often and under what conditions does it flood?*

- Not all states and communities require that present-day flood risks be disclosed. And there are no robust uniform national standards for disclosing future flooding risks or standardized maps for providing tidal flood risk information. Asking direct questions of a seller, realtor, or town planner will increase the likelihood of getting any information they may have.
- Beyond your prospective property, learn what condition the local

flood-prevention infrastructure is in and how its maintenance is funded. Ask what plans and investments the town is making to protect against future flooding, including investments in hard or green infrastructure, protective local zoning, and building regulations.

## Ask a Home Inspector and/or Engineer

*Do you see any evidence of tidal/high-tide flooding on the property?*

- Realtors may not know the specific history of the property. But home inspectors can look for evidence of flooding. An inspector may be able to offer insight on how vulnerable the home is structurally to future tidal flooding. Discuss pros and cons (including costs) of potential protective measures such as elevating electrical equipment or the home itself.
- With increased sea levels, rising water tables can infiltrate groundwater supplies and contaminate a property's well water. Salt water can similarly infiltrate and damage septic systems. If such risks may be present, consider a more specialized expert evaluation—such as a groundwater or septic engineer—than what you would obtain from a general home inspection.

## Ask Your Insurance Agent

**How much will flood insurance cost to cover damage from tidal flooding and other coastal flood events? How much coverage does the insurance provide? What about future rate hikes?**

- Most homeowners' insurance does not cover damage caused by flooding of land that is normally dry. For that coverage, flood insurance is needed.
- If your property is located in a FEMA high-risk flood zone and you have a federally backed mortgage (with Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac, for example), you will be required to carry flood insurance. Your mortgage lender may have additional requirements.
- Even if you are not in a FEMA-designated high-risk flood zone, you could still experience tidal flooding. Make an effort to understand your risk before you decide to forego insurance.
- If you determine that you're either required to carry insurance or it would be financially wise to do so, you will need to purchase flood-specific coverage either through the federal National Flood Insurance Program or a

private insurance company—be sure to research and understand the advantages and disadvantages of each. Flood insurance costs should be factored into the cost of home-ownership along with other ongoing costs such as property taxes and municipal water/sewer charges.

## And Keep in Mind . . .

As the frequency of tidal flooding increases, some communities could experience erosion of their tax base, which can threaten crucial public services, and local real estate markets could face a downturn. Asking questions about the risk of tidal flooding when you are buying a home, and sparking community-wide discussions, is one way you can help . . . yourself and the community.

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*The data referenced in this document come from *Underwater: Rising Seas, Chronic Floods, and the Implications for the US Coastal Real Estate*. You can read the report and view maps at [www.ucsusa.org/underwater](http://www.ucsusa.org/underwater).*

*Data for that research was provided by third parties through the Zillow Transaction and Assessment Dataset (ZTRAX). More information on accessing the data can be found at <http://www.zillow.com/ztrax>. The results and opinions presented in that report and this guide are those of the Union of Concerned Scientists and do not reflect the position of Zillow Group.*

TO LEARN MORE, VISIT:

[www.ucsusa.org/underwater](http://www.ucsusa.org/underwater)

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