

## ► DirecTalk



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## Tybee

I breathe out. Trees breathe in. Life is tethered to this relationship. I ponder this unspoken arrangement while motoring on I-80 east of Savannah, Georgia, at day-break, a time of day that delivers an ethereal setting for Spanish moss cloaked Southern Live Oaks, *Quercus virginiana*.

My ambitions today reflect an absurd sense of possibilities as I aim to dine al fresco on Thanksgiving leftovers while ensconced on the island beaches of Tybee, Georgia, and Kiawah, South Carolina. Travel mercies will be necessary if I hope to arrive at the terminus of this adventure safely—home tonight in Maryland. I chuckle at the prospect of me qualifying, in some perverse sense, as a modern-day midnight Rambler.

The incongruence of Tybee leaves me breathless. It is at once a charming, coastal barrier island replete with eye candy in the way of the iconic light house. Then a seedier, disturbing past knocks on the door. The 10th Street Savannah Beach played host to the Tybee Island Wade-Ins, a 1960s Jim Crow-era effort by Black residents who defied local norms by wading into the surf of what had historically been an all-White beach. A group of Black youths, literally students, imbued with beryllium-like strength and courage. A story worth unearthing.

The pluck and mettle of the Tybee waders seduce me into a deep state of reflection as I hit the road to Kiawah. The highways are in various states of disrepair, aggravated by holiday traffic and what seems at first glance to be largely road widening projects. Infrastruc-

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ture. President Joe Biden signed the \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill earlier in November, and it seems our profession has once again been relegated to the periphery of the conversation. Nonetheless, our interests are central to much of the investment, which possesses a backstory worth sharing.

I release an exasperated sigh as I take in the emerging saga of the infrastructure bill. Exhibit A is the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility near Honolulu, Hawaii, a city I know well from my time of collaboration with the Hawaii Environmental Health Association. The Hawaii Department of Health recently ordered the U.S. Navy to take immediate action to clean the drinking water at Joint Base Pearl Harbor–Hickam after the World War II-era petroleum storage facility was determined to be leaking into the Red Hill aquifer. Reportedly more than 700 people have been forced from their homes while the environmental health issue is resolved.

While leaking petroleum storage facilities represent classic point sources of groundwater contamination, Lowndes County in Alabama illustrates a nonpoint source infrastructure challenge. County residents largely rely

on septic systems, many of which are failing. Reports of sewage backing up into homes on days with heavy precipitation are legendary. It's not just unsightly and disgusting, it's a health hazard. A 2017 study found hookworms, commonly associated with poverty and unsanitary conditions, to be prevalent among the local population.

Then there is Benton Harbor, Michigan, a predominantly Black community with lead service lines. Old and failing infrastructure have subjected community members to the risk of lead exposure. Regrettably the drill is all too common. The state's governor and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have intervened.

These stories are derived from the papers to which I have a subscription. Many of us conjure up the vision of roads, bridges, ports, and rails when infrastructure is discussed. My impression is admittedly distorted; skewed toward the pulse of modern life—eating, drinking, recreating, and breathing. Our stuff.

It doesn't end there. I received an electronic message a few weeks ago from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It seems they received a \$400 million appropriation from Congress to invest in future public health leaders. They were soliciting people like me to review Public Health AmeriCorps grant applications. The program's noble aim is to supplement the existing public health workforce while priming the pump for individuals who potentially aspire to a career in public health. I readily agreed to be a reviewer. True

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to form, environmental health considerations were absent in the notice of funding opportunity. Opioids, check. Health education, check. Environmental health, absent. Same as it ever was.

I'm struck by the current pandemic and reference to its novelty. Novel coronavirus. Exactly 300 years ago as I type these words there was a smallpox outbreak in Boston, Massachusetts. As the New England community struggled to contain the outbreak, you won't be surprised to learn that there were criticisms of the efforts to protect and promote public health. The drill is eerily familiar. *Quarantine will hurt the economy. Government should not impede on individual freedoms. There was politically motivated suspicion seeded around inoculation efforts.* Sound familiar? Nothing has changed in 300 years. If you doubt me, please conduct your own research.

This time is our moment in history to probe for a new way forward. A way that frames infrastructure as environmental health. A way that frames investments in the public health workforce inclusive of environmental health. A way that frames pandemic management inclusive of the centrality of environmental health. Rest assured, your staff at the National Environmental Health Association are working on this challenge.

I leave you with one final observation. When consuming the news, we are collectively assaulted by national experts reporting



Tybee Island Light Station. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.



Spanish moss. Photo courtesy of Angela Dyjack.

and tendering recommendations on COVID-19. So, I googled the academic qualifications of these influential experts. Do you know how many of these committed professionals have degrees in public or environmental health? Not one. Discretion dictates that I don't call them out by name.

The Route 301 Governor Harry W. Nice Memorial/Senator Thomas "Mac" Middleton Bridge unites Virginia with Maryland. It is a two-lane monstrosity that will be replaced with a new span sometime next year. An overdue transportation renaissance. The 1

a.m. drive over the old span steals my breath away. I exhale with relief as I enter Charles County, Maryland, and inhale the seasonal pine-infused vapors released by my neighborhood's coniferous forest. Arriving home exhausted, the hinges squeal as I unlock the deadbolt on my front door. I drink deeply from the days experience, inebriated by the vision and courage of the Tybee waders. 🐢

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