NEWS REPORTS FROM JAPAN SHOWING TOWNS swept away by the recent tsunami and survivors fleeing from toxic leaks could be a preview of what lies ahead for the Houston area.

Had Hurricane Ike made landfall a mere 30 to 50 miles to the south, Houston’s main water treatment plant would have been completely submerged, according to Dr. Phil Bedient, a professor of environmental engineering at Rice University, leading to a loss of safe drinking water for days if not many weeks. Moreover, refineries and processing plants along the ship channel would have contaminated the floodwaters, swamping the city in a toxic soup. He made these warnings as a panelist in an RDA civic forum focusing on hurricane planning and preparedness in the Houston/Galveston region on Wednesday, March 9.

In addition to Dr. Bedient, the forum featured County Judge Ed Emmett and Galveston Mayor Joe Jaworski. Lonnie Hoogeboom, Director of Planning and Design at Houston Downtown Management District and Rafael Longoria, ACSA Distinguished Professor at the University of Houston, both moderated the discussion.

Although no plans were discussed to prevent the flooding of the water treatment facility, Dr. Bedient did present several options for levees and dikes. One such option was to create a channel gate across the opening to the bay between Boliver Peninsula and Galveston Island. The strategies were more targeted than the grand “Ike Dike” proposal by Dr. Bill Merrell.

Attendees asked about possible land buy-outs to create no-build zones. Judge Emmett responded “of course it’s possible, but to do it on a scale necessary—I don’t see how you do that.” He talked about the size of the population of Harris County. “Did you know that the unincorporated areas of Harris County, when taken together would be the seventh largest city in the US?” he asked.

Notably, Mayor Jaworski responded to the question of land buy-outs with some passion. “We gotta remember how we got here. Europeans came over in boats and built where they landed. How do you forget that? We have to find a way to let people live there [Galveston Island] in order to service the port, the hospitality industries, the historical areas, and educational institutions. We need to build new homes to withstand the storms, build well and smart on Galveston Island,” he said.

The hour-long forum seemed to raise more questions than answers. Solutions are only beginning to gain traction. Five years after Rita and two years after Ike, we must heed the final words of the evening from Lonnie Hoogeboom and just “pray that there isn’t another big storm this year.”

- Allison Parrott