

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community Resilience Building in Common Fence Point

COMMON FENCE POINT (CFP), A PORTSMOUTH, RI NEIGHBORHOOD ON NARRAGANSETT BAY, is home to full-time and summer residents and features beaches and marshes, and a strong sense of community. It is also one of the more vulnerable Aquidneck Island neighborhoods to impacts from storms, winds, and rising seas. With this in mind, a partnership of the University of Rhode Island (URI), Narragansett Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (NBNERR), Town of Portsmouth and Common Fence Point Improvement Association (CFPIA) initiated in 2018 to engage residents in enhancing their resilience to natural hazards as a way to protect their infrastructure, environment, and social assets - all central to the vibrancy of the community.

After meeting with the partners for several months, the CFP “tiger team” of volunteers planned and convened a two-part Community Building Resilience workshop for residents to discuss the primary hazards affecting their neighborhood, identify their strengths and vulnerabilities, and develop and prioritize actions to increase resilience throughout the community. Over 30 neighborhood residents – joined by Town staff, Town Council members, and representatives from local businesses - came together to engage in a process that has been used in over 200 communities and is now applied for the first time in Rhode Island. Three small groups discussed infrastructure, environmental, and social assets; highlighted strengths and vulnerabilities; and identified key actions and priorities. The groups then shared with each other, reaching consensus regarding the priority issues and actions.



Residents discuss issues and opportunities related to storms, floods, and other hazards. Photo by J. McGaw.

Key Hazards Seen Today, Increasing in the Future

Building upon the climate-related hazards identified in the Town’s hazard mitigation plan, the workshop participants discussed impacts they’ve already experience, such as coastal flooding from storm surge and rising seas, flooding from heavy rain events, wind and shoreline erosion.

Building upon Strengths, Reducing Vulnerabilities

Participants highlighted various strengths that they value and see as a foundation upon which to build. These include infrastructural assets such as the Community Hall, the VFW, the marina and the convenience store. Among the social assets, participants identified community events, active communication among neighbors, and “the rock” as some of the most significant. The neighborhood’s environmental strengths include its shoreline, scenic coastal view, salt marshes, and trees and other flora.

When discussing vulnerabilities, infrastructural assets of concern include the entrance to the neighborhood, septic systems, roads, the recreational field, and public access points. The elderly, residents with special circumstances, children and pets were highlighted as potentially vulnerable populations whose safety during emergencies must be ensured, especially given potential concerns about evacuation and medical services access during a large event. When looking at the vulnerabilities with the environmental assets, participants highlighted shoreline erosion, trees being cut, litter, and changing vegetation in the salt marsh.

Priority Concerns and Key Actions

Looking at impacts to the key infrastructural, environmental and social assets of CFP, workshop participants identified their top priorities for action. Discussion included the need to engage Town staff and leadership and to leverage other opportunities to enhance resilience of the neighborhood.

Examples of Key Assets of Common Fence Point shared by Workshop Participants

Infrastructure: Entrance to CFP, Community Hall, VFW, septic systems, roads, residences

Environment: Shoreline, wetlands, beaches, trees, the scenic views

Social Assets: Residents, elderly, special needs, children. "the rock", communications, social and wellness activities

Primary CFP entrance and exit. All three break-out groups identified this asset as the highest priority for action.

The narrow access under the railroad bridge of this most used route to both enter and exit CFP was identified as a major safety concern for cars and pedestrians, which is exacerbated by heavy rains, as the existing drain does not seem to provide adequate drainage. Residents indicated that they are unable to use this access point during such times and raised concern over the ability of emergency vehicles to access CFP.

Participant recommendations include: Evaluate the options to increase safety and traffic flow with road/bridge configuration, signage, lights, and/or mirrors; add a pedestrian access; address the drainage issues by increasing the existing drain and/or infiltrating to adjacent vegetated areas; and identify an additional alternative access point for emergencies. Note: As of August, 2019, many of these recommendations have been implemented.

Street flooding within the neighborhood. Citing concern of poor drainage in some areas, sump pump discharge to the streets during heavy rain events adds to the flooding. Cumulatively this results in debris clogging storm drains,



Rain gardens, like this one at the Community Hall, can help reduce street flooding. Photo by ERICD

the ponding of water, and shoreline erosion when the water drains to the Bay.

Participant recommendations include: Understand the flooding causes; create and evaluate an action plan for the residents and the Town; contact the Portsmouth Department of Public Works to help evaluate the problem and monitor/maintain storm drains; identify a post-disaster recovery/clean-up process for the flooded streets and additional resources as needed; outreach to residents on ways to reduce flooding.

Increased resident preparedness and safety during emergencies. There was consensus regarding the community members themselves being the greatest asset in need of protection. In particular, residents are concerned about their neighbors with special circumstances, including, but not limited to, the elderly and children. They stressed the importance of knowing your neighbors and that being there for each other during emergency situations is something that CFP could do to increase its resilience.

Resident recommendations include: Undertake a community process, such as “Map My Neighborhood,” to learn more about the residents of CFP and their potential vulnerabilities, as well as potential hidden assets/skill sets that members might be able to share during dire situations; outreach to expand enrollment in the Special Needs Registry; educate residents on “Know your Risk, Make a Plan, Make a Kit”; community forums on preparedness; evaluate feasibility of a generator for Community Hall.

Community education related to natural hazards. Workshop participants expressed the need for more education related to natural hazards and threats to the environment. Potential topics include alternatives to discharging sump pumps into the streets and protecting native vegetation (e.g., limit cutting of street trees and marsh reeds). Foul odors from septic systems, especially during periods of high groundwater levels, is also of concern, as is the high cost to retrofit and maintain more efficient systems.

Resident recommendations include: Educational programming and resources on: septic systems, road drainage, preserving vegetation, the causes of and prevention of erosion; and the benefits, protection, and restoration of ponds and marshes.

Moving Forward

The following actions are being planned, as of July 2019:

- Expand and formalize the CFP Coastal Resilience Tiger Team as an official subcommittee of the CFPIA, to help organize efforts and increase awareness and preparedness in CFP.
- Work with the Town, including the Emergency Management Director, to help implement actions consistent with the Hazard Mitigation Plan and Comprehensive Community Plan.
- Promote open communication to/from neighbors and the Town.
- Identify opportunities, such as funding or partnerships, to support neighborhood activities related to resilience.

“We have a lot of workshops and we get a lot of outputs but we have a perfect model here to start working. Looking to take these initiatives to implement in other neighborhoods and communities—it’s important that this input gets put into a more formal process and this is going to live on with a follow through process.”

As of August, 2019 the Common Fence Point Community Preparedness Committee was organized to take action on key recommendations to enhance the neighborhood’s preparedness to natural hazards today and in the future.

