

BUILDING A RESILIENT FUTURE FOR PROVIDENCE

BUSINESS AND CIVIC LEADERS FORUM 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



INSTITUTE AT BROWN FOR ENVIRONMENT & SOCIETY | THE UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND
COASTAL RESOURCES CENTER | RHODE ISLAND SEA GRANT | RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN | WATERFIRE PROVIDENCE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building a Resilient Future for Providence: Business and Civic Leaders Forum



This Executive Summary highlights portions of the forum. For a more in-depth view of the event and its takeaway messages, please see the full Summary Resource Document prep-ri.seagrant.gso.uri.edu

ON JANUARY 15 AND 16 2019, PROVIDENCE-BASED BUSINESS AND CIVIC LEADERS CAME TOGETHER

to catalyze thinking and action towards planning now for climate change impacts, challenges, and opportunities to make Providence a more resilient, prosperous, healthy and equitable city.

More than 75 leaders participated in the two-day event to learn about the proactive and positive efforts underway to increase resilience in Providence, explore opportunities to weave the efforts into a unified—and thus more powerful—framework, and identify a critical action plan for moving forward. Organized by a team of partners from host entities Brown University (Brown), the University of Rhode Island (URI), the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), and WaterFire Providence, the event included an evening panel, a morning forum, small group discussions, and networking focused on critical elements for moving forward in a collaborative way.



Purpose of the Forum: The two-day event was designed for business and civic leaders to:

- Ignite interest about the importance of engaging in building resilience in Providence
- Introduce how rising seas and extreme weather associated with climate change will affect the city and efforts underway to build resilience
- Share information about resilience initiatives in other cities
- Identify the information gaps and questions coming from the community and ways to begin to answer them
- Explore ways to move forward collaboratively with the entire community in making the city more resilient to the impacts of sea level rise and changing climate

Summary of the Forum/Highlights, February 15: The evening speakers, discussion, and reception gave participants the opportunity to learn about a variety of local, regional, and global resilience perspectives provided by a panel of special expert guests. Curt Spalding, event organizer from Brown, provided a personal view of Providence's changes over the past decades. His talk was complemented by a [short documentary film](#), "A River of Change: Preparing for Climate Change with an Evolving Civic Culture." Produced by a team of Brown students, the documentary highlighted successes of the past that can help inform future directions. Welcome remarks and support for increasing collaboration were shared by Russell Carey, of Brown and the Providence Foundation Executive Committee, and Providence City Council President Sabina Matos, who shared that leaders "want to be part of the solution."

Urban Resilience

The capacity of individuals, communities, institutions, businesses and systems within a city to survive, adapt and grow, no matter what chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience.

100 Resilient Cities

Setting the Context, Providing Lessons Learned: Barnaby Evans, of WaterFire Providence, illustrated some challenges and opportunities in creating resilience in Rhode Island's capital city. He shared that the hurricane barrier was designed to protect the downtown from storm surge and that Providence's geography reflects that much of the city was built upon hilly terrain, thereby reducing the impacts of sea level rise. Sharing photos of today's flooding along the riverbanks at extreme high tide, Evans cited current sea level rise projections of at least 9.6 feet by 2100 and highlighted that flooding will become more and more frequent, affecting transportation, businesses, and historic buildings. "We need to see these challenges as an opportunity to once again reinvent Providence."

To this local context, Bryna Lipper, of 100 Resilient Cities, brought global experience to address the characteristics of resilient cities and engage the attendees in discussing approaches for initiating resiliency conversations in communities. "Cities need to radically rethink behavior and investments," she said, emphasizing that oppor-



In thinking about how to stretch limited capacity and resources, we should think “leave no benefit behind,” where, for example using green infrastructure to reduce flooding can also enhance recreational parks.

Shaun O'Rourke, RI Chief Resilience Officer and RI Infrastructure Bank

tunities to address climate adaptation must be accompanied by progress to address inequity and social cohesion and to integrate resilience as a “lens” to the city’s critical functions. She explained that urban challenges are global challenges and that in the coming decade, over \$50 trillion will be invested in infrastructure, creating a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to invest” in a resilient future.

Bringing lessons from a regional example, John Cleveland of the Boston Green Ribbon Commission highlighted the commission and its value to increasing Boston resilience, shared practical actions that the group has undertaken, and provided input about what Providence can do in a similar vein. Working side by side with the city, the commission brings business, institutional, and civic leaders together to develop shared strategies. Cleveland felt this is an important forum through which Boston stakeholders have a trusted means of engaging in dialogue about resiliency options and testing them out. “Honest, hard work and open discussion are the means forward. There is no magical solution where you can go for answers. This is an opportunity to invent.”

Panel Discussion: With the goal of applying this experience to Providence, the speakers were joined by Bonnie Nickerson, Providence’s director of long range planning, and Leah Bamburger, the city’s sustainability

“Climate change is a critical global issue, but its effects are especially pronounced in our cities. The Providence Foundation and our members recognize this and are committed to working with partners in business, government, and the nonprofit communities to build a resilient Providence.”

Cliff Wood, Executive Director

director. Moderated by URI Coastal Resources Center Coastal Manager Pam Rubinoff, who also represented Rhode Island Sea Grant, discussion among the panelists and attendees highlighted some key messages:

- Thinking resilient is thinking forward
- Find, enable, and feed the innovators—these are the people who will push and pressure their peers
- Leverage the “good stuff” that the city already is doing
- Outline and communicate current plans to show how resilience can be integrated within them
- Plan for disruption by learning to change before changes happen
- What’s made can be remade—stop holding on so tight to the idea of loss
- Work to uplift the voices of people who are not at the table—those who need to be at the table but can’t be due to environmental and social hardships
- Be urgently patient—we need time to bring everyone in

Summary of the Forum/Highlights, February 16:

The second part of the forum consisted of a morning program that encouraged participants to reflect on the previous night’s presentations and discussions, and then engage in small group work focused on key issues. URI President David Dooley and Rhode Island Sea Grant Director Dennis Nixon welcomed participants and highlighted their support and encouragement for URI to engage in a resilient future both locally and globally.

Small Group Discussions: Taking advantage of the collective experience at the forum, participants divided into five small groups: Leadership & Strategy; Economy & Society; Infrastructure & Environment; Health & Wellbeing; and Communication, Education, & Outreach. The purpose of these groups was to talk



“As a community and faith leader, I experienced this conference as a clear call to action. Our city’s response to the pressures caused by a changing climate can’t just be technical; it will need to be adaptive and multipronged. We will need strong and healthy neighborhoods and resilient relationships to manage what is coming creatively. The time to begin this work is today while we still have time to make changes and build relationships across difference and division.”

The Rt. Rev. W. Nicholas Knisely
Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island

about issues facing resilience and to help clarify the challenge areas, opportunities, and suggested actions to move forward for a resilient Providence.

Across the small group discussions, certain consensus points emerged. For example, in general, the groups indicated that significant work regarding resiliency has already taken place in the Providence area, and therefore, a solid foundation is available upon which to build a collaborative effort. Also, it was noted across groups that the tenor of the effort going forward must be positive, and accentuate resiliency as an opportunity, as opposed to a challenge. Finally, it was emphasized in several small groups that the next steps in a collaborative effort be the identification of doable and visible actions to unite and excite people about engaging with the effort.

The Path Forward: As a final session at the forum, participants assembled to review the highlights of group discussions. Bringing lessons learned from the first night together with the opportunities and challenges identified in group discussions, Anne Tate, of RISD, and Pam Rubinoff, of URI, facilitated participant engagement in a “needs and offers” marketplace, where key short-term actions were linked with potential implementing organizations. These, together with the various inputs throughout the two-day event, provide three directional themes that emerged as a result of the forum and capture the actions identified.



Convene: Experience shows that an energized and committed core group of local leaders is needed to commission, usher through, and support a collaborative framework for moving forward. This group and/or network needs a respected organizational base with convening power and sustained support to be able to manage a significant leadership effort.

Collaborate: Building on existing partnerships or creating new ways of working together to learn, share information, identify gaps, and implement actions will bring the best positive impact on any effort. Whether it is building consensus on detailed scenarios, identifying adaptation strategies, or evaluating economic opportunities to enhance resilience, collaboration across academic institutions and coordination with key stakeholders will lead to more successful outcomes.

Communicate: With the goal of building a broad constituency with knowledge about climate change impacts and actions, there needs to be a clear, compelling, and accessible narrative as well as diverse pathways for sharing information with all stakeholder groups.

RESOURCES: See more detailed information about the forum at prep-ri.seagrant.gso.uri.edu/municipal/providence-pilot-project/

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