

**On Hurricane Sandy's Anniversary,
A NH Seacoast Community Plans for the "New Normal"**

Local, State, and Federal Governments All Play A Role in Climate Adaptation Planning

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by Todd I. Selig

On October 28, 2013, the Town of Durham and the Strafford Regional Planning Commission (SRPC) organized a well-attended meeting at Durham's new public library to engage the broader community in local climate adaptation planning. The forum, which coincided with Hurricane Sandy's anniversary, was designed for volunteer boards, business owners, neighboring communities, and residents interested in understanding the potential impacts of climate change and hearing more about the recently completed Climate Adaptation Chapter of Durham's Hazard Mitigation Plan.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reports at www.epa.gov/climatechange that over the last several decades, the Northeast has experienced noticeable changes in its climate: *"Since 1970, the average annual temperature rose by 2°F and the average winter temperature increased by 4°F. Heavy precipitation events increased in magnitude and frequency. ...Climate scientists project that these trends will continue."* The EPA website notes that by the end of this century New Hampshire's summers could be as warm as North Carolina's summers are today, and *"the combination of a projected increase in heavy precipitation and likely sea level rise may lead to more frequent, damaging floods in the Northeast in the future."*

Durham therefore joins other seacoast communities Hampton, Seabrook, Newfields, Hampton Falls, Exeter, Dover, and Portsmouth wrestling in their own distinct ways with adaptation, which is planning for the climate changes that are expected to occur, and mitigation efforts to limit future impacts of that change. But the need for climate adaptation planning is not exclusive to the Seacoast. The potential negative impacts of climate change will likely affect all NH communities over time.

Because the oldest parts of Durham were settled almost four hundred years ago along low-lying tidal waters on the shore of the Oyster River and Great Bay, adaptation and resiliency planning related to sea level rise are key priorities here. The purpose of the Town's Climate Adaptation Chapter is to develop strategies that protect areas at risk from flooding due to climate change and to identify various regulatory and non-regulatory options that can be considered by the Town. With collaboration from municipal officials, Durham residents, scientists at the University of New Hampshire, and several state and local agencies, the goal of this work is to increase the Town's resiliency.

Recommendations in Durham's Climate Adaptation Chapter include:

- Developing strategies to address energy efficiency in building design and the promotion of Smart Growth to minimize energy requirements of Town residents and businesses;

- Encouraging increased use of bicycles and walking as well as the use of more energy efficient vehicles;
- Developing alternative renewable energy resources such as solar, wind power, and hydroelectric where practical;
- Discouraging redevelopment in areas damaged by recurrent storms or chronic erosion to prevent future losses;
- Establishing setbacks in areas at risk for potential sea level rise;
- Promoting conservation and proper management of open space lands to maintain biodiversity and reduce flooding risk;
- Educating local residents and land use boards concerning climate change and ways to mitigate adverse effects.

The White House Climate Action Plan, announced in June, suggests that adapting to a changing climate is necessary and requires the attention of all levels of society. It states: *“As we act to curb the greenhouse gas pollution that is driving climate change, we must also prepare for the impacts that are too late to avoid. Across America, states, cities, and communities are taking steps to protect themselves by updating building codes, adjusting the way they manage natural resources, investing in more resilient infrastructure, and planning for rapid recovery from damages that nonetheless occur.”*

Municipal planning and decision-making are accomplished locally. The role of the state and federal government is to ensure communities have the information and tools at their disposal to make the best decisions possible and to remove barriers that may prevent sound, community-specific local decisions from being acted upon.

Across New Hampshire municipalities are celebrating their 250-, 300- and 375-year anniversaries. Our political subdivisions were designed to last, as were the city halls and town structures built to support our communities. Incorporated 281 years ago, Durham and its recent efforts serve as a reminder that severe impacts of a changing climate might very well represent the “new normal” within New Hampshire’s future. Locally, residents in the Seacoast are beginning to take steps to protect their communities from a changing climate. To do so represents good common sense and needs to be done utilizing the best available science. To do nothing represents an approach that fails to appreciate our carbon dependent past, misses opportunities to improve, and ignores the welfare of future generations.

To view the Durham Climate Adaptation Chapter on the Town’s web site, go to <https://www.ci.durham.nh.us/administration/climate-adaptation-chapter>

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