

Online Earth Day Event To Focus On Climate Change

By: Tim Wood

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CHATHAM – Unable to hold an in-person event due to the coronavirus emergency, a local group is taking its Earth Day celebration online.

Chatham Acts On Climate, formed recently to promote local action on climate change, will host a “stay home event” Saturday, May 2, to mark the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, which fell on April 22. Nine speakers will talk about actionable ideas, projects and opportunities that the group will be supporting in the next 12 months.

“We wanted to cover all the different ways climate change affects the town, and all the different actions people are taking to try to mitigate the problem,” said Bob Wirtshafter, a member of the Chatham Acts on Climate (C-CAN) steering committee and a panelist.

C-CAN is affiliated with the Cape Cod Climate Collaborative and sponsored a “Climate Emergency Declaration” citizens petition that won the unanimous support of the board of selectmen and is scheduled to go before voters at the annual town meeting, which has yet to be rescheduled. About 50 people are involved in the group, said steering committee member Janet Williams.

Although advisory, the declaration asks town officials to consider the impact of municipal actions and policy decisions on climate change going forward.

“It needs to inform everything across the board,” Williams said. Some elements of town government already incorporate climate change concerns into decision making, but that needs to be expanded. “The impacts are felt all across how we all live,” she said.

Scheduled to speak at the May 2 event, which runs from 9 to 10:30 a.m., are Dr. Robert Duncanson, the town's director of health and nature resources; Bob Lear of the Chatham Conservation Foundation; Rev. Brian McGurk of St. Christopher's Episcopal Church; Carole Ridley, director of the Pleasant Bay Alliance; DeeDee Holt, president of Chatham Friends of Trees; Sarah Griscom of Pleasant Bay Community Boating; Aiden Kotoski, a Monomoy High School graduate and student at the University of Rhode Island; Kristin Andres of the Friends of Chatham Waterways; and Wirtshafter.

C-CAN got its start after Roz Coleman heard Orleans resident Mon Cochran, executive director of the Cape Cod Climate Change Collaborative, speak at Pleasant Bay Community Boating's

speakers series. Coleman set up a meeting in January to talk about establishing a Chatham climate change group; about a dozen people were invited to the initial meeting, she said, and about 30 showed up.

About the same time the initiative to put climate emergency declarations before every Cape town was launching, the C-CAN's steering committee decided to take it on as its first project. Selectmen endorsed the measure on March 8, just before the coronavirus shutdown hit full force. There had been no plans for any other activities, said Williams, so Wirtshafter suggested an online event in recognition of Earth Day's 50th anniversary.

“We needed something, because everybody was feeling a little deflated,” she said.

Wirtshafter has been involved in energy efficiency and renewables for 45 years. He started a program with the Tennessee Valley Authority in the 1970s to insulate homes and use solar power, forestalling the need for five new power plants.

“It was one of the first examples of doing conservation rather than building new power plants,” he said. He taught energy management policy at the University of Pennsylvania and has been a consultant for the past 25 years, working with state energy efficiency programs such as MassSave. He's chairman of the town's energy committee and a member of the planning board.

He'll be talking about components of energy efficiency programs which direct address climate change by reducing carbon footprints. The town of Chatham, he noted, is a designated Green Community and has made strides in energy efficiency; the town has five electric vehicles in its fleet and large solar arrays at the former landfill and on several town buildings.

“Quite honestly the town itself, town buildings, are fairly well insulated. We have all the solar that we can produce. Any new buildings that go up will have solar and be very efficient,” he said.

“To me energy efficiency is the first step we all have to take if we're serious about climate change,” he said.

Chatham is also studying the impact of climate change on coastal resources, especially in Pleasant Bay and along the town's eastern coast.

The current emergency has put climate change on the back burner for many, Williams noted, but when the stay home and business closure orders are lifted, “the bigger, looming, slower moving crisis is right there,” she said. Having speakers at the May 2 event concentrate on the actions and programs already underway to reduce greenhouse gas emissions was a conscious decision to emphasize the positive and “give all these organizations an opportunity to ask for some support.” The forum, she hopes, will give people “a renewed commitment to avoiding the climate crisis.”

The Earth Day event will take place via Zoom. Because of space limitation, participants are asked to register by April 30. For assistance, email chathamcan@capecodclimate.org, or visit capecodclimate.org/chatham-can.

