

# Forum Details Local Actions To Combat Climate Change

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CHATHAM – Although it may have receded into the background during the coronavirus crisis, climate change remains as much a threat to the future as the current emergency. But unlike the virus, there are things people can do to help counter climate change.

That was the premise of “Chatham Acts On Climate,” an online forum held Saturday by the Chatham Climate Action Network (C-CAN). About 70 participants heard nine local officials, representatives of environmental organizations and residents talk about actions that have been taken in Chatham to address climate change and get advice about what individuals can do to contribute toward a solution.

“Deep change is needed,” said Brian McGurk, rector at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church. “COVID-19 is teaching us that we must change our way of life. Radical change is needed collectively and individually.”

Sea level rise has long been recognized here as a chief impact of climate change, said Brian Miner, a member of the C-CAN steering committee and the forum host. But “the whole idea of what climate change is about has certainly expanded a lot,” and that has been recognized by the town's leadership, which has taken diverse steps to reduce the town's carbon footprint as well as take environmental consequences of climate change into account, he said.

Chatham has been facing the consequences of climate change since at least 1987, when North Beach broke through and ushered in a period of rapid shoreline erosion. While that was a result of a 150-year barrier beach cycle, it has been exacerbated by environment alterations caused by climate change, said Dr. Robert Duncanson, director of the town's department of natural resources.

“We are already experiencing the physical impact of climate change in Chatham, and it really started with the first breach,” he said. The impact has focused on the shore, where more frequent storms and higher tides has made flooding more common. That has impacted roadways, infrastructure, residences and access, and it's happening more and more frequently, he said.

“All that is going to increase as we go forward with climate change,” he said. Other ecological consequences of climate change include changes to the commercial fisheries, as cold water species move north and warmer water species take their place. “That obviously has an impact on the fishing community, which is worth in the town of Chatham millions of dollars every year,” Duncanson said.

“It's not going to go away,” he added, and it has a cost to taxpayers as roads need to be raised and infrastructure like water mains have to be adapted. The impact of climate change has been taken into account in some recent projects, such as reconstructed trap dock in Stage Harbor. The new structure is reinforced to deal with increased flooding and storms, although to raise the dock high enough to deal with sea level rise projections would have made it unusable.

The Pleasant Bay Alliance has developed tools for property owners and towns to use in managing erosion in the bay, said Executive Director Carole Ridley and is working on ways to protect coastal resources through a “living shoreline approach,” which combines several methods to control erosion.

A petition asking town officials to adopt a policy to consider climate change in all decision making won the support of the board of selectmen and was scheduled to be on the warrant for the upcoming June 22 annual town meeting, noted Miner. Similar petitions are pending before town meetings across the Cape.

Lowering the town's carbon footprint is one of the most important things municipal government can help do, said Bob Wirtshafter, chairman of the town's energy committee and its representative on the Cape Light Compact. Chatham's actions earned it a Green Community designation from the state and a \$150,000 grant that will be used to implement energy efficiency improvements to town buildings, he said.

The town has installed five solar projects that produced 2.3 million kilowatt hours of power in 2019, saving \$214,000. Three more solar arrays—at the fire station, community center and police department parking area—are being planned, and when completed, 100 percent of the municipality's electrical usage will be covered by solar power. The town also has five electric-powered vehicles, and publicly accessible electric car charging stations are planned at the annex and downtown town offices but are on hold due to current budgeting concerns.

Wirtshafter encouraged residents to take advantage of free energy audits provided by the Cape Light Compact, and for businesses, property owners and developers to strive for net-zero energy use on new construction.

“It's the perfect time to do that,” he said. “There's extra incentives.”

Salt marshes sequester more carbon than upland, and the Chatham Conservation Foundation is working to restore salt marsh in the Frost Fish Creek system, said president Robert Lear. The group is seeking \$85,000 in community preservation funds for a baseline study of the system and will eventually examine the impact on the marsh of opening the culvert underneath Route 28.

Trees also hold vast amounts of carbon, help control runoff and absorb air pollution, and Friends of Trees is planting and replacing trees throughout town, said president DeeDee Holt. The group planted 100 white oak saplings for Arbor Day, and recently planted trees in the expanded area of Union Cemetery.

“Planting a tree will immediately return benefits to our environment,” she said.

St. Christopher's is a member of the Faith Community Environmental Network, which, like C-CAN, belongs to the Cape Cod Climate Change Collaborative. McGurk said the group focuses on environmental justice and protecting the ecosystem of the Cape and Islands. Members try to set an example by adopting green measures; St. Christopher's is currently installing solar panels on its roof.

“We try to set an example as a faith community for all our parishioners and members,” he said. It is a moral imperative to support these policies for the common goal of “the wellness of both people and the planet,” he said.

“Change demands political action from all of us, especially people of faith,” he said.

Asked what residents can do to address climate change, Wirtshafter said, “Go out and plant a tree today. It's a beautiful day!”