

MVC Climate Resilience Committee (CRC)

Listening Session #8: Emergency Managers

September 15, 2020, on Zoom

CRC members and MVC staff present: Liz Durkee, Alex Elvin, Tristan Israel, Kathy Newman, Kate Warner

Emergency managers present: Christina Colarusso (Oak Bluffs), Alex Schaeffer (Edgartown)

Key points

- Several areas of high concern were identified (see below).
- Edgartown has retrofitted some of its pump stations to make them more water-tight, but Tisbury has not. If there were a major outage, there would be sewage on Beach Road.
- FEMA recently awarded a grant to Edgartown and the MVC to study wildfire risk and resilience at the state forest and other vulnerable locations. Alex Schaeffer is in the final phases of putting the project out to bid.
- EMs discussed issues surrounding the state forest manager position.
 - Kate Warner suggested that the CRC could ask Dylan Fernandes to help put that in motion.
 - Kathy Newman suggested that people seize on the wildfires out west as a moment to take action here.
 - Tristan Israel said he would bring up the forest manager situation with the Dukes County Commission.
 - Christine Colarusso suggested writing a letter for the county and fire chiefs to sign.
 - Ben recommended that any request to the state should focus on the need for more local control over how the forest is managed in general.
- EMs described regional planning as a work in progress, and stressed the importance of having plans in place that allow them to respond to emergencies in a flexible way.
- Christina is updating the Tisbury Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan and hopes to finish this fall.
- Dukes County Commissioners recently met with emergency managers to identify areas where the County can help. That group will hopefully resume in the near future.
- Christina suggested looking into funding for Judy emergency kits, which could be distributed for free.
 - Liz suggested collaborating with the West Tisbury and Aquinnah climate committees, which have developed a fact sheet with tips for how to prepare for hurricanes.
- Alex noted that discussing emergency issues in the context of climate change might be counterproductive, since it would invite some people to question the science. Conversations could focus instead on specific effects, such as flooding at Dock Street, which are irrefutable.

- Covid-19 changed the way emergency managers look at sheltering. Managers have also struggled to plan for emergencies in regard to the transient population.
- Alex mentioned ongoing efforts to use wireless notification systems, and to plan for events that might disable transportation to and from the Island. When things get bad, the Island will need to look to off-Island sources for materials and equipment.
- Evacuation off-Island might be possible in an emergency. Instead, people would need to shelter in place, if the SSA evacuates its boats to New Bedford.
- New buildings and pumping stations on the Island should include two generators with two tanks and/or battery storage, and possibly solar panels, to increase backup energy from two days to a week. Batteries could probably not be installed within 200-300 feet of a wellhead.
- Christina mentioned the idea of a water truck that could serve up-Island communities in an emergency.
- The Island should be ready to function on its own for at least a week in the event of a serious emergency.
- Most emergency managers would support the idea of a regional EM to coordinate grants, plans, etc., but funding is still a question.
- Christina agreed to participate in future emergency planning through the MVC.

Notable statements

If we had a major storm and lost the ability to get refueling of propane and fuel, we would be in a dire situation within a couple days. – Christina Colarusso

We should be aiming for a week of resilience in case things hit the fan. – Christina Colarusso

We struggle with resilience because we are based off our year-round population for all our services. When we see the influx in summer, we are laughably underprepared because there is not enough infrastructure on the Island. - Alex Schaeffer

More eyes on this is good; many hands make light work. – Alex Schaeffer

Summary of meeting

I. Major concerns to address in the Climate Resilience Plan (CRP)

Christina Colarusso and Alex Schaeffer identified the following major concerns that they would like to see the Climate Resilience Plan address:

- Flooding at 5 Corners and accessibility during storms
- Vulnerability of Steamship Authority ports and infrastructure within flood zones (there currently is not much in the way of backups and redundancy, such as restaging equipment)
- Flooding at Dock Street and Beach Road

- Diminishing rainfall and the resulting increased risk of wildfire (the Vineyard seems to no longer get multi-day soaking rains, only shorter bursts that leave the forests drier; about half the state forest is located in Edgartown)
- Low-lying areas with critical infrastructure, such as Chappy Ferry ramps, which are often inundated during moon tides (the ramps could be raised, but the surrounding areas are still low-lying)
- Increased frequency of storms
- The Island is “laughably” underprepared in terms of emergency management for peak summer population
- Long-term impacts of flood vulnerability on tourism
- Availability of generators and other equipment adequate for use in emergencies

II. Updates on MVP and other grants

Alex said an Edgartown MVP Action Grant project to develop a climate change flood vulnerability assessment, along with adaptation planning, is still in the information gathering stage. One of the first steps for the project was to hold a public workshop at the Whaling Church to gather input from the community. About 40 people attended and provided a broad range of information. Christine said she had not been updated on a Coastal Zone Management grant in Tisbury to evaluate coastal processes and storm impacts in Vineyard Haven Harbor. She noted that Edgartown recently retrofitted some of its pump stations to make them more water-tight, putting it ahead of Tisbury in that regard. If there were an outage, she said, there would be sewage on Beach Road.

Ben reported that the MVC did not receive the MVP Action Grant for the Climate Resilience Plan that it applied for in June. Nantucket and Oak Bluffs also did not receive MVP grants in this round. The state had received about \$42 million in funding requests, but had only \$9 million to give out, which highlights the need for the Vineyard to expand its funding options, including town meeting appropriations and private foundations. The MVC and Oak Bluffs also applied jointly for a CZM Coastal Resilience Grant for a StormTide Pathways study of the Island, which will involve mapping the areas where water actually goes during storms, as opposed to maps that just show the floodplain.

FEMA recently awarded a grant to Edgartown and the MVC to study wildfire risk and resilience at the state forest and other vulnerable locations. Alex said the town is now in the final phases of putting the project out to bid. The cost-sharing portion will be covered by nonprofits.

Alex explained that emergency managers refer to SLOSH (Sea, Lake, and Overland Surges from Hurricanes) maps and consider high water and winds in their resilience planning. He added that fire departments have dry suits, shallow water boats, and other resources for evacuations and other emergencies.

III. Discussion of state forest manager position

Alex shared his thoughts about the need for a state forest manager, which he said was a complex situation. The current job description requires an advanced degree, which he said Island emergency

managers were unsure was necessary. The state doesn't currently allow anyone to live in the house at the state forest, which also limits the number of potential candidates, in part because the salary is only about \$60,000 and housing is so sparse on the Island. Alex argued that because the Department of Conservation and Recreation can have specialists come in when needed, it would be more cost effective to find a manager who can conduct necessary work in forest, rather than one with advanced degrees who can oversee subcontractors. It was understood that allowing the house to be lived in would require an act of state legislature. Kate Warner suggested that the CRC could ask Dylan Fernandes to help put that in motion. A recent article in the Gazette following a meeting of the MVC drew some attention to the forest manager vacancy and opened up a discussion that Alex said the DCR had been reluctant to have before. He saw a need to strongarm the department to get them to consider the Island's needs. Kathy Newman suggested that people seize on the wildfires out west as a moment to take action here. Tristan Israel said he would bring up the forest manager situation with the Dukes County Commission. Christine suggested writing a letter for the county and fire chiefs to sign. Ben recommended that any request to the state should not be limited to the house, but should focus on the need for more local control over how the forest is managed in general.

IV. Discussion of regional collaboration among emergency managers

The emergency managers described their regional planning process as a work in progress. Alex explained that they try to work together as needs arise, which might only involve some of the towns at any one time. He suggested that the planning process in general could be examined more closely. Emergency managers also try to pool resources to avoid duplicating efforts, and information is shared across the board, including through monthly updates, which allows managers to learn from each other's experiences. Alex described Tim Carroll in Chimark as the "library" for what has been done in the past, and what to do differently now. Alex acknowledged that there are certain projects or efforts that each town needs to pursue on its own.

Each Island town is supposed to have a Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP), which among other things establishes a chain of command for emergencies. Christina has been updating the CEMP in Tisbury, as part of the Tisbury Police Department's efforts to attain accreditation from the state, and . (Some departments have used an "all-hazards" approach to emergency planning, rather than a CEMP.) She said the CEMP update was about 75% complete and she hoped to finish in the next month, although she has been somewhat preoccupied with current infrastructure concerns, including the need for better generators and other equipment for Tisbury.

V. Discussion of Climate Resilience Plan process and other issues

Alex said it was somewhat premature to specify adaptation needs in Edgartown that the CRP should address, but as more data is compiled, the picture will become clearer. There is currently a disconnect in terms of needs and funding, such as the need to protect businesses along Dock Street, for which there is no funding that Alex was aware of. He stressed that community buy-in will be essential to that type of project. He also highlighted the need for an informational setting regarding adaptation in general. Liz noted that the MVC is planning to hire a consultant with global experience to help with

that process. Liz and Alex agreed that adaptation planning was a daunting task, but meetings such as the current listening session were something of a relief in terms of laying out the issues.

As an aside, Tristan mentioned a recent meeting of Dukes County Commissioners and emergency managers to identify areas where the county can help. That group was sidetracked by the summer season, but will hopefully resume in the near future. Tristan said the recent departure of County Emergency Manager Chuck Cotnoir has left the County somewhat in the dark on emergency management issues. Alex noted that County Manager Martina Thornton has stepped in and has been attending meetings with Island emergency managers. He cautioned that while emergency managers are often seen as a catch-all for addressing Island issues, that isn't always the best approach.

VI. Discussion of outreach and messaging

Christina suggested looking into funding for Judy emergency kits, which could be distributed for free, along with some outreach related to storm preparedness. Giving things away is one way to bring attention to an idea. Liz suggested collaborating with the West Tisbury and Aquinnah climate committees, which have developed a fact sheet with tips for how to prepare for hurricanes.

Alex noted that discussing emergency issues in the context of climate change might be counterproductive, since it would invite some people to question the science. Instead, the conversations could focus on specific effects, such as flooding at Dock Street, which are irrefutable. Ben agreed that specific issues were important, but also pointed out that resilience planning is focused largely on effects that aren't completely apparent yet, or that will get worse over time as a result of the changing climate. Connecting the immediate and long-term effects is an important aspect of the planning process. He saw it as a "both-and" situation, where outreach should focus on the existing problems, and also build awareness that the problems will get worse in the future. Tristan added that sea-level rise and increased temperatures on the Island have been documented. Ben argued that people who question the science should do so in a public setting, since the sooner society as a whole accepts the science, the better. Christina agreed that planning should focus on big-picture thinking, as well as specific projects and ideas.

VII. Lessons from the pandemic and other issues

Alex noted that pandemics are all different, Island departments did not have exactly the right materials on hand to address Covid-19, and there are likely no materials that would be appropriate for every type of pandemic. He stressed the importance of having plans in place that allow departments to respond to emergencies in a flexible way. Covid-19 also changed the way emergency managers look at sheltering, since the normal model did not work due to social distancing.

Managers have also struggled to plan for emergencies in regard to the transient population. Code Red is useful, but only for people who sign up for it. And there is the question of how to reach people coming over on the ferries in the summer. Alex mentioned ongoing efforts to use wireless notification systems, and to plan for events that might disable transportation on and off the Island. Christina added

that when things get bad, the Island will need to look to off-Island sources for materials and equipment.

Christina has been gathering ideas about how to evacuate the Island if necessary, and she said the Aquinnah police chief didn't think evacuation would be possible. Instead, people would need to shelter in place, since the SSA would likely evacuate their boats to New Bedford. She also wanted to see new buildings and pumping stations (both water and wastewater) on the Island include two generators with two tanks and/or battery storage (rather than one generator with two days' capacity as is often the case), and possibly solar panels, in order to increase backup energy from two days to a week. But she acknowledged that batteries could probably not be installed within 200-300 feet of a wellhead. In the event of a major storm where propane and fuel could not be resupplied, she said the Island would be in bad shape within a couple of days. (The airport, for example, as only a 500-gallon propane tank for the whole Business Park.) As long as water pumps can still operate, Christina and Alex didn't see any issues with a lack of public water, at least down-Island. Christina mentioned the idea of a water truck that could serve up-Island communities in an emergency. She said in general the Island should be ready to function on its own for at least a week in the event of a serious emergency. FEMA's Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) grants could be pursued for some of those needs. Christina agreed to participate in future emergency planning through the MVC. Alex Elvin said the MVC is also looking into BRIC grants as a possible funding source for the CRP.

VIII. Discussion of idea for Islandwide emergency planner

Christina liked the idea of a regional emergency planner, noting that her duties became more regional during Covid-19. A regional position would bring all the EMs together in terms of networking with the MVC and channeling resources toward shared goals. Alex said there has been much discussion about such a position, and other communities have done it successfully. He said it would make sense to have a person under the direction of Island EMs to coordinate grants, plans, etc., as it would relieve some of the current administrative burden. But funding is still a question. He believed most other EMs would feel the same way.