Meeting Minutes
April 15, 2014
RI DEM • Room 300

Cities and Towns

In attendance: Janet Coit, DEM, Council Chair
Jamia McDonald, EMA
Julia Gold (for Dr. Michael Fine), DOH
Kevin Flynn, DOA/Planning
Grover Fugate, CRMC
Marion Gold, OER
Melissa Long (for Michael Lewis), DOT
Richard Licht, DOA
Hanna Morini (for Marcel Valois), CommerceRI

Director Coit called the meeting to order at 2:05 p.m.

Director Coit began with a statement that, in order to make the best recommendations in its May 1st report, the Council is gathering information from a multitude of sources. This includes today's panel, made up of municipal representatives who represent inland as well as coastal communities. Director Coit then asked the four panelists to introduce themselves and provide an overview of issues they would like to bring before the board.

Fred Presley, Town Manager of West Warwick, introduced himself, noting that he began working with the Town as a town planner the week after the 2010 flooding. He provided an overview of issues impacting West Warwick, including riverine flooding and old, inadequately sized stormwater infrastructure, all of which is exacerbated by increasing frequency and intensity of storms. He noted that, since the flooding of 2010, there have been six significant events that qualify as "100-year storms." The town has some 24 to 48 homes that, depending on the storm intensity, are routinely flooded; as a result, a group of residents are filing a class-action suit against the town. Stormwater management challenges for the town are complicated by development and upgrades done by neighboring communities, resulting in larger stormwater lines feeding into West Warwick's smaller ones, thus impacting the town's capacity. He highlighted a problem involving the Scituate Reservoir with which the town needs help from the state. The Reservoir is maintained at maximum level, which means that, when a major storm occurs, it acts the same as a parking lot, i.e. the extra water runs off and leads to major flooding downstream. What needs to happen is better utilization of National Weather Service forecasts and controlled releases ahead of time to create storage capacity and help prevent flooding. Director Coit marked this as *an item for follow-up*.

Jason Pezzullo, Assistant Planner for the City of Cranston, introduced himself and echoed many of Mr. Presley's concerns, including the one about the Scituate Reservoir. Cranston and West Warwick share a watershed, which is an important parameter for planning purposes**.** Cranston has experienced its share of flooding, including significant flash flooding in the summer of 2013 during highly localized storms. Mr. Pezzullo noted the importance of having a stormwater utility district to help fund both maintenance and new, including green, infrastructure. He highlighted the city's effort to develop its hazard mitigation

plan, which, among other things, identified critical infrastructure that is at risk, such as the sewer plant, pump stations, electrical substations, etc. He also described how the City is using Community Development Block Grant funding to buy out properties in areas of the city especially prone to flooding, noting, however, that such buyouts are very costly, at some $250,000 per home. The city has had very good experience working with the National Resource Conservation Service, in particular on projects that help increase flood storage. The biggest question is how much can be done with very limited resources, in particular capitalizing the projects in the hazard mitigation plan. Prioritization will be necessary.

Jon Reiner, Town Planner, North Kingstown noted the tension that can occur in coastal communities, such as North Kingstown, between residents of coastal sections and inland sections. The biggest impacts will incur in areas like Wickford and Quonset Point, which happen to centers for revitalization and economic growth. There can be a disconnect between the planning for these areas and the people choosing not to live in them. He reviewed efforts in North Kingstown related to mapping and planning, and now outreach, with assistance from URI, CRMC and Statewide Planning. He has observed growing interest in the community, both from residents and in the commercial sector. Given how difficult it still is to help residents and the business sector understand long-term impacts, Mr. Reiner suggested a statewide policy that produces consistent scientific and technical information, projections and guidance. This would help communities better communicate with residents and the business sector.

Jane Howington, City Manager, City of Newport started by saying she agreed with what the previous speakers had said and would not repeat it. With respect to her own community, she specifically noted the impacts of tidal flooding, "dry-flooding," etc. Such impacts are being felt even after work with point-source reductions and the installation of flapper valves in tidally influenced lines. Ms. Howington noted that the community suffered five severe events in the past two years. The city has been working with the University of Rhode Island on mapping and planning, similar to the work in North Kingstown. And as with North Kingstown, the city is working on expanding public education efforts. As a result of increased flooding, especially in areas not accustomed to such events, Ms. Howington noted that more residents understand the natural hazard impacts of climate change. She also noted that sea-level projections (a possible 3-5 feet in thirty years) have the city deeply concerned about next steps. To the council, Ms. Howington stressed that solutions must be found by communities, federal and state government, and the private sector working together. This includes coordination of requirements (such as FEMA insurance policies and historical building requirements). Such issues should also be of interest to the business community, as response and resiliency can be a major economic driver. Ms. Howington noted a concern for protecting the city's museum contents. And she stressed the need for regional efforts—especially in issues like stormwater management. She noted that the communities on Aquidneck Island should all be working together on a single storm water management system.

Director McDonald commented that the voluntary Community Rating System referred to by Ms. Howington is intended to help communities meet several of the goals she had mentioned. In addition, she noted there is a cultural heritage working group looking at issues like protecting museum contents. McDonald then asked about what structures would be helpful to manage the available information and needs of communities. Ms. Howington noted that information coordination and management is needed and that such structures or systems should be able to be shared, or that a clearinghouse should be developed to assist communities. Mr. Presley confirmed the difficulty in working with the requirements of FEMA. Director McDonald asked if a state-run buyout program, for instance, would be helpful, to which Mr. Presley said yes, and that such programs should consider infrastructure, too, such as moving wastewater treatment facilities.

Director Coit noted that similar conversations have indicated the need for consistent mapping and data.

Director Licht discussed the need for local communities to work together and/or combine services rather than maintain control over repetitive municipal programs. Citing specific examples, the panel agreed that regional and statewide approaches are necessary. Director Coit suggested that URI and its Coastal Institute would be helpful in this area.

Director Coit asked the panelists for specific needs that could be addressed by the agencies of the Council.

Mr. Pezzullo noted that local residents have an aversion for new local fees. Messers Reiner and Presley agreed that educational efforts would assist in people understanding the needs for such fees, for example, for better flood and stormwater management. Another incentive would be for the state to rank regional projects higher single-community ones for funding. Mr. Reiner noted that such funding prioritization would prevent communities from competing with each other.

Directors McDonald and Fugate discussed available data and ways to incorporate such data into policy. Mr. Reiner noted how the legal requirement for affordable housing percentages helps communities plan for associated costs. A similar statewide driver could also help communities plan for climate-related natural hazard impacts.

The panel and the Council discussed the impact and importance of property law and private property rights in the context of community-wide planning for storm and flood damage. It was also noted that small businesses often do not plan far into the future as they do not know in the current business climate how long they will be viable.

Mr. Flynn encouraged cities and towns to articulate what their specific needs are to be able to incorporate hazard assessment and mitigation into local planning efforts.

Director Coit opened the meeting up to the public.

Rubén Flores-Marzán, director for planning and development for the City of Providence, noted the opportunities for cooperation among communities.

Tom Uva of the Narragansett Bay Commission noted efforts underway by the NBC to support communities and asked about interest in a statewide stormwater management district. Ms. Howington noted that with a statewide program, the associated reduction in administrative costs would be of interest to smaller communities, but would not be a significant factor for larger communities. Mr. Reiner suggested that such a statewide program should return funds to local communities for their use.

Liz Scott of DEM discussed DEM stormwater efforts and the regional opportunities within some statewide efforts.

Director Coit noted that the governor's budget includes regional approaches related to water resources.

Robert Vanderslice of DOH noted the importance of riverine flooding standards (in relation to scientific studies incorporated into policy) as well as sea-level rise.

Julia Gold of DOH discussed the communication of statistical probabilities of events as a percent of risk rather than terms like “100-year storm.”

Pam Rubinoff of the URI Coastal Institute noted the opportunities and resources at the URI, including the ability to summarize the science as a “neutral convener,” provide teams to assist municipalities with pilot projects, policy development, etc.

Director Coit asked the Council to consider how a science advisory board should be formulated and where it should reside. She agreed with Pam that the University of Rhode Island would be one example as it is a neutral body.

Director Fugate noted the upcoming regional climate conference at Antioch College, as well as the upcoming hurricane conference.

Director Licht noted the importance of the proposed bond for water resources.

With no further business or discussion, Director Licht motioned to adjourn the meeting. Director McDonald seconded the motion. All voted in favor.