

# **Town of Scituate Coastal Community Assessment**

**June – September 2018**

*Prepared by Carri Hulet of The Consensus Building Institute*

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In the summer of 2018, the Town of Scituate, Massachusetts undertook a Coastal Community Assessment to learn more about what residents, businesses and civic organizations, as well as town staff and leadership think about the risks and opportunities associated with being a coastal community. This assessment was conducted by Carri Hulet, Senior Mediator with the Consensus Building Institute, through confidential interviews with members of the community.

In recent years the Town of Scituate has been actively engaged in addressing coastal issues and trying to plan for the future. Scituate has pursued and received grants and loans, and appropriated funding at Town Meetings to address coastal problems. The town has participated in sea level rise studies and pursued answers on related issues from experts in the field. For example, an extensive study, completed in 2016 and titled “Coastal Erosion, Sediment Transport, and Prioritization Management Strategy Assessment for Shoreline Protection,” looked squarely at what could be done along Scituate’s shorelines, including where the town might place its limited dollars for public services, emergency response, and other local government functions. Another effort to assess the vulnerability of Scituate’s critical infrastructure and resources resulted in “Building a Resilient Scituate,” a climate vulnerability assessment and action plan, completed in March, 2018.

These studies and assessments of current and future physical conditions provide important data and recommendations based on best practices and what has worked elsewhere. The town could implement all of these recommendations if it had unlimited resources *and* the community was perfectly aligned with the priorities of the researchers. But, in reality, the town budget and staff are constrained, and there is a wide range of views in the community about what is most important or urgent to address.

This assessment serves as a starting point for understanding the key concerns and interests of the Scituate community, including which actions or policies for the coast might be acceptable to the public.

### **Key findings**

Interviews with over 40 individuals representing a cross-section of the community in Scituate revealed a strong attachment to the town and deep ties to living or working near (or on) the water. Scituate residents see themselves as historically resilient to coastal impacts, but doubts are creeping in about Scituate’s ability to remain resilient into the future.

Many in the community recognize that efforts have been made to understand Scituate’s coastal challenges and some people expressed appreciation for the efforts to date to address those challenges, but there is a strong demand for a cohesive strategy for the coast, with clearly-defined steps that build toward a set of objectives and outcomes. Building resilience for downtown Scituate Harbor – the “lifeblood” of the town, as many described it – appears to be highest priority.

The interviews revealed a mix of appreciation and skepticism for local government action on the coast. There also appears to be a strong desire for community engagement, but relatively little confidence that high quality, frequent engagement will happen. Some interviewees also expressed desire for help from the state and federal governments and collaboration with other municipalities or regional entities with expertise on coastal issues. Interviewees had many suggestions for specific policies and actions that might be taken at the local, state, and federal level. These are enumerated in the full report.

The community appears to pull together in miraculous ways during storm emergencies, a point of great pride for residents and businesses alike. Many, however, worry that the way emergencies are handled is not sustainable, and are interested in seeing changes to ensure emergency management remains one of Scituate's strengths.

### **Recommendations**

Given the findings, CBI recommends the following actions to the Town of Scituate:

**1) Through a robust community engagement process, develop and adopt a long-term coastal resilience vision and strategy.**

The questions facing Scituate are not about whether to take action on the coast, but how, when, and where to act. The community is eager to see these questions answered strategically and to be meaningfully involved in the process so the long-term plan is community-developed and community-supported. In the full recommendation section we lay out a skeleton process to ensure those decisions are made with the right information and guidance, and with support from community representatives.

**2) Review, summarize, and present in a simple format, the key actions that have been taken in recent years to improve coastal resilience in Scituate, and the relevant recommendations that have been made in previous studies and plans.**

Currently, there is no easy way to find out what Scituate already knows about its own coastal vulnerabilities and strengths, what solutions have already been implemented or considered, and what remains unknown. An effort to compile and summarize that information would be tremendously helpful to many people for various reasons, and would be critical for the effort described in Recommendation #1.

**3) Convene community conversations about managed retreat**

Many in the community want to talk about managed retreat, but it's a topic that can only be approached sensitively and skillfully, and without any expectation of a given outcome. We propose a possible path for supporting conversations on this challenging issue.

**4) Review, update, and document the emergency management protocols for coastal storms.**

We recommend that the key players involved in emergency management be supported in an effort to review their processes, identify gaps that need additional support, and formally document the work needed to keep people safe during storms.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This assessment was conducted by Carri Hulet, Senior Mediator with the Consensus Building Institute (CBI). CBI is a non-profit organization based in Cambridge, Massachusetts that helps communities and organizations collaborate to make better decisions, achieve agreements, and manage multi-party conflicts and planning efforts. For more information on CBI and Ms. Hulet, see [cbi.org](http://cbi.org).

The purpose of this assessment is to gain perspective on the views that exist among Scituate residents and workers on the town's coastal challenges and opportunities to become more resilient. To encourage candid responses, interviewees were promised confidentiality. Ms. Hulet conducted interviews between June and September, 2018. The individuals named below were interviewed one-on-one in person or over the phone, or in small groups in person. This assessment report includes a summary of the findings as well as recommendations.

The assessment was paid for through a partnership between the Town of Scituate, the EPA's Conflict Prevention and Resolution Center, and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. In addition to conducting interviews and writing this report, the scope of work included time to review reports, studies, news articles, blog posts, and public meeting minutes regarding Scituate's coast and coastal infrastructure.

CBI wishes to thank all those who contributed to this report.

### **Interviewees**

Janet Babbin, Summer resident (Peggotty and Town Way)  
David Ball, Resident (Cedar Point) and Chair of Scituate Coastal Coalition  
James Boudreau, Town Administrator  
Kevin Cafferty, Director of Public Works  
Janet Cornacchio, President of the Scituate Arts Association  
Maura Curran, Board of Selectmen and Resident (inland)  
Bob DeLorenzo, Resident (inland) and former member of various Town committees  
Carly Desmond (and 3 elementary-aged children), Residents  
Sara Despesa, Manager, Nona's Homemade Ice Cream  
Kathy Donahue, Resident  
Krissy Donahue, Owner, Nona's Homemade Ice Cream  
Neil Duggan, former Building Commissioner  
Nancy Durfee, former Coastal Resource Officer  
Lynda Ferguson, Owner, The Inn at Scituate Harbor  
Marie Flaherty, Owner, Native  
Tom Hall, Coastal Advisory Commission member and Resident  
James Hunt, Resident (inland)  
Keith Jansen, Resident (Humarock)  
Patrick Kearney, Resident  
Jennifer Keefe, Director of Public Health

Kathleen McCarthy, Resident (inland), Teacher at Scituate High School, and lead volunteer with SANDS  
Fran McMillen, Owner, Scituate Launch  
Muskaan Merchant, Resident and Student at Scituate High School  
Michelle Moran, Resident (Cedar Point) and member of Scituate Coastal Coalition  
Sarah Murdock, Coastal Advisory Commission member and Resident  
John Murphy, Resident (Sand Hills) and Chief of Fire Department and Emergency Management  
Meghan Neri (and 2 elementary-aged children), Residents  
Mark Perfetti, Resident (Humarock)  
Louise Pfund, Coastal Advisory Commission member and Resident (Mann Hill)  
Matthew Samartino, Coastal Advisory Commission member and Resident  
Doris Seroll, Resident (Sand Hills)  
Kim Stewart, Animal Control Officer and Chair of SANDS  
Carol Sutherland, Owner, SKYSAIL Marketing  
Mark Thompson, Deputy Chief of Police  
Kerry Tondorf, Owner, Riva Restaurant  
Valerie Varrasso, Resident and Scituate High School student  
Gail Varrasso, Resident and Scituate High School teacher  
Bob Vogel, Resident (inland) and Building Commissioner  
Amy Walkey, Natural Resources and Conservation Officer  
Brad Washburn, Director, Planning and Economic Development  
Michele Wood, Manager, Mill Wharf

## **FINDINGS**

*Note from the interviewer: This section (Findings, pages 7-16) represents the aggregate feedback provided in the interviews, as true to the voice of the interviewees as possible. I have exercised professional judgment in compiling these findings and have, in a few places, provided some context or otherwise commented on the feedback, but none of the views on Scituate's coastal state of affairs are my own. I have also worked to protect confidentiality. Also, because these findings represent the opinions and lived experiences of those who were interviewed, they have not been "fact-checked" or evaluated for accuracy. The value of these findings is in understanding how people think and feel about living, working, and playing on Scituate's coastline so decisions about its future are informed by the community's diverse perspectives.*

### *Being Scituate – Community Values and Culture*

When asked, "What do you love about living or working in Scituate?" the responses almost unanimously centered around being near the water and feeling a strong sense of community. One person said she "pinches herself every day" because she feels so lucky to live in such a beautiful place near the water with good schools and nice people. Several people mentioned the unique identities associated with each distinct neighborhood, emphasizing that Scituate's strong community feel starts with small, tight-knit neighborhoods. A lot of people are glad that Scituate is a "hidden gem" – tucked away from major thruways and a little hard to get to. Many people talked about their deep roots in Scituate because they own family legacy properties, or because for decades their families spent their summers in the town and they are carrying on the tradition. Some of the people who are newer to the area said they were drawn here because they grew up near the water but couldn't afford to stay in those places and Scituate was an affordable alternative with all of the same benefits of water access and a peaceful, small-town feel.

At the same time, many described life in Scituate, particularly right on the coast or near the rivers, brooks, and marshes, as "high reward, high risk." Several people expressed the sentiment that living in Scituate is an absolute dream 360 days out of the year, but a nightmare when winter storms batter the town. Many people shared terrifying stories of the impacts they or their family or friends had experienced, including storm damage, power outages, missing days of work and school, and being trapped in places that had become inaccessible due to flooding. Several people spoke of others' losses with great compassion, as if anyone's loss was a tragedy for all. A lot of people joked about how "crazy" you have to be to live here, or made comments like, "Well, it's not for the faint of heart." Some expressed concerns that Scituate residents "have short memories," because in February and March people are having serious conversations about selling the house and moving somewhere else, but by June "everyone is out on their decks drinking wine and the storms are long forgotten."

A few people spoke hopefully about their children or grandchildren remaining in Scituate, but a view shared by many is that they might be the last in their line to take part in the legacy they have inherited. They talked about gaining property or traditions from parents and grandparents, but feeling doubtful of being able to pass them along. Different reasons motivated these comments, but the reason most frequently cited was concern

about climate change and sea level rise. Almost everyone said they are worried about the increase in both frequency and intensity of storms (though one interviewee was emphatic that these impressions are false).

A striking number of people used the same word, without any prompting, to describe the Scituate community: resilient. Some people expressed great pride in the fact that “we get knocked down, but we come right back up.” It was important for people living and working on the water to say that they take personal responsibility to manage the risks. They use their own money and sweat equity to build and rebuild. Many plan carefully and budget appropriately. The neighborhoods have complex communication systems for caring for one another. Many private physical fortifications are extremely innovative. While there were plenty of cries for more help from the government (see more below), people who live and work on the water say they are not blind to the problems and they don’t expect anyone to feel sorry for them. They help themselves and they help their neighbors. One person said, “it’s a lot of work to live here, but we obviously think it’s worth it.” Dealing with the problems is a necessary, but acceptable consequence of living in a place you love.

While many people talked about this attitude of toughness in the face of adversity with great admiration, many also expressed a more cynical view, calling people in Scituate (including themselves, in some cases) foolhardy or stubborn. Some spoke of the cavalier determination to remain strong in the face of risk with great concern – fearing that the very culture that has kept Scituate vibrant for so long might also contribute to its demise. One example, often cited, is the community’s resistance to talking about planning ahead for relocating away from places that are not habitable in the long-term (see more below on managed retreat). And others pointed out that, without the help of publicly funded sources, which they see at risk of being cut or simply insufficient (such as the National Flood Insurance Program and post-disaster aid through FEMA), nearly everyone would be unable to weather the storms, no matter how tough they might be.

Other differences in views and opinions are important to note to provide context for the findings and recommendations in this assessment. Scituate is a diverse community in terms of perspectives on key issues and each person brings to the issues raised in this report a set of values and experiences that are unique to her or him. That said, when views align, it can very often be attributed to whether the person lives on the coast or inland, and how long she or he has been a Scituate resident. One example is the very different ways people perceive recent efforts by the town to get easements for a beach renourishment project. People who were not involved, or only marginally involved tended to think the project was a “no-brainer” and that the people who declined to sign the necessary paperwork must be motivated simply by a desire to keep the beach in front of their house private. Those who were involved, whether they signed or not, tended to have a much more nuanced view. They had concerns with safety and timing. While some admit to being worried about public access and impact to their views, they weren’t necessarily opposed on those grounds. In some cases they had questions that they didn’t feel were sufficiently answered. A lot of the resistance, for some, came down to uncertainty and issues with communication. This illustrates the reality that efforts to

address coastal impacts at the municipal level are not simply technical matters. The perfect solution from an engineering perspective may not be the right match for a neighborhood. And even the most appropriate project may fail if the people who must support it aren't given the information they need to buy in. The solutions to these problems invariably bump up against values most people hold dear, such as private property rights, safety, and independence. One goal of this assessment, therefore, is to paint a rich picture of the Scituate community by describing, with great respect, both the differences in perspective among its members and what appears to be held in common.

### *Planning for Scituate's Future*

One of the strongest findings of the assessment is a clear demand for a long-term vision and plan for the coast to keep Scituate thriving and safe. Most people expressed their perception that the town is not doing enough to think long-term about coastal resilience. Even among those who are aware of the extensive work that has been done in recent years to understand Scituate's risks, and the actions taken to reduce some of the town's vulnerability along the coast, there is a strong sense that these efforts are too haphazard and opportunistic, rather than strategic moves toward a coherent vision for the future. Many people are aware, for example, that Scituate has committed significant grant dollars to commission studies of its risks, but few could speak to any of the results of the studies or say whether or how those studies will impact decisionmaking. Many interviewees said they would like to see those recommendations vetted in some way by the public, with their costs and benefits being weighed as part of a broader coastal management effort.

The desire to see the town prioritize the coast above all other issues was mentioned repeatedly. This is not a surprise, given the focus of the assessment and the orientation of the people interviewed, but the intensity of the sentiment was notable. Nearly everyone said something about the coast being the defining feature of Scituate's identity. They said, "The reason people come here is for the water." Also, the coast is Scituate's economic engine. The value of the tax revenue from Scituate's coastal properties and businesses is top of mind, with multiple people mentioning the particular value of second homes, which are taxed at higher rates. Some people think it's not just important and valuable to prioritize the coast, but urgent. One person said with great exasperation, "Why are we debating a plastic bag ban when we have houses falling into the sea?" Many people shared similar sentiments, expressing their view that nothing is more urgent to address than Scituate's coastal resilience, or that nothing will have a greater impact on the long-term viability of the town than what happens on the coast in coming years.

### *Investing in the harbor*

There is a powerful consensus around the extremely high value of the harbor (variously referred to as "the downtown," or "Village Harbor," or "Front Street"). The harbor was described as both the economic and social center of town. People said it is not just a place for shopping and eating, but where one goes to run into neighbors at the grocery store and connect with others over coffee. It is the site for various local events. Residents, whether inland or coastal, love having a small commercial center in their town that is historic, walkable, and right on the water.

The flipside of the affection for the harbor is deep anxiety for its well-being. A lot of people are worried and scared. When Front Street flooded in the March 2018 storm it awakened people to the severity of the vulnerabilities. Many of the interviewees said they had never seen flooding like that in the downtown and it made them more nervous about the future of the harbor than they had been before. There is a clear demand to focus attention on protecting the harbor and supporting its businesses. A few people independently remarked on the expense and effort the town gave to build a seawall for a small stretch of residential properties, while in contrast their perception is that the town is doing little or nothing to ensure that the “heart and soul” of the community remains vibrant.

Businesses in the harbor are not lacking in ideas to support the commercial district. Their vision is to increase foot traffic by bringing more businesses that have products or services people can only get in person, and that stay open all the time, rather than seasonally, or in limited hours. They are concerned about businesses like real estate, which don't draw the same crowds as businesses like small restaurants or boutique clothing stores, becoming over-represented in the mix of commercial activities. They would like to see more formal efforts to promote Scituate's working harbor from the water side. Local businesses want to sell Scituate as a way station with clean bathrooms, fresh water, great food, and interesting shops to boats traveling between Boston and points to the south. Businesses are concerned about the limited amount of parking available, particularly when much of the parking floods on a regular basis. They say employees take up half the parking, which is a problem they don't know how to solve because most employees come from outside Scituate. Business representatives in general feel they are doing a great deal, on their own time and with their own money, to promote the downtown. They mentioned the lights at Christmas, Heritage Days, First Fridays, Halloween festivities, the Cultural District designation, and the Scituate Sister City project as initiatives they have led with little or no support from local government, but which provide tremendous public benefits, from their perspective. Many business interests feel taken for granted – “overtaxed but underappreciated” – and unaware of any business-friendly benefits they might be receiving in return for their tax contributions. Some participated in the interviews for this assessment only begrudgingly because they are weary of being evaluated for studies that they say do not lead to action.

Concerns about coastal impacts only add to the business community's anxiety. They want a long-term plan that makes the business district more resilient to coastal impacts while expanding commercial activities. As it is, they deal with impacts every year that are unique to their respective business models. The food businesses often lose product because they lose power and can't refrigerate their goods. All businesses with employees risk losing their labor force because workers, particularly low-wage employees, can't survive many days without work. Stores with products that can be damaged by water have to relocate all of their products or simply throw away whatever gets damaged after-the-fact (and many never file insurance claims because the value of the goods is often lower than their high deductibles). The hotels can't stay open if they can't heat the rooms, even if they are not flooded. Added to these concerns is the fact that downtown Scituate gets the most media attention during storms when Scituate's business district “looks like

a war zone.” Businesses, like residents in Scituate, pride themselves on their capacity to bounce back. They, too, operate with the “high reward, high risk” mindset and are committed to Scituate. But they hope for increased attention and help so they can continue to be a vibrant contributor to the Scituate community.

### *Local Government*

The interviews revealed a fairly typical mix of admiration and frustration with local government relative to its handling of coastal issues. Most of the praise for the town was related to the handling of emergency response. On the more critical side, many people said their perception is that the Scituate lacks a cohesive, long-term strategy to address coastal problems, which again many see as the town’s most critical and pressing problems. Also, while many people said they think “the folks in town hall” work really hard and have the best interests of the community in mind, the town’s methods of communication were criticized more often than praised, citing minimal community engagement and some memorable disrespectful interactions. A few people said they think town government is challenging to access, like a club that favors those with an “in” with the right people.

Some interviewees said they appreciate the amount of work that has been done to secure grant funding and perform studies that give the town highly valuable information about its vulnerabilities and options. Now, many said they are tired of being studied and eager to engage the community in the questions the experts have been working to answer for them.

There is a concern that the town is short-staffed. Some feel this leads to a reactionary environment in which nearly everyone is “putting out fires” all day. Also, some staff and leaders work most frequently with people who are unhappy with something the town has done (or not done), so they may be getting a skewed view of public opinion and have a hard time knowing what the “silent majority” would like them to focus on. Some leaders seem genuinely perplexed by the deep distrust they perceive in the community of town government. This lack of trust, they feel, makes it harder to reach the people they want to help because their intentions and actions may be misinterpreted.

### *Coastal Policies and Practices*

The feedback provided on coastal policies and practices, including possible solutions, is best shared with minimal aggregation, as many of the ideas are quite specific. The bulleted feedback grouped below by category is offered, to the extent possible without betraying confidentiality, as the person or people stated it. This is done to illustrate the impressive range of issues these stakeholders think and care about. It should be assumed that other views are held in the community that are *not* represented here, but this list may serve as a useful starting point for understanding how members of the community think about Scituate’s coastal challenges and the solutions they would like to explore.

- How to approach coastal issues:

- We need to make hard decisions now for the benefit of future generations. We need leaders to be willing to say this – to be bold about doing the right thing.
- Coastal issues do not exist in a bubble. They are related to other problems we have, like brown water, new development, sewer and septic issues, and our aging infrastructure. We do ourselves a disservice if we try to manage them in silos.
- We need to protect what we have first before dedicating money to new construction. And when we build something new, we need to plan for its long-term maintenance.
- We need stronger policies to protect first responders. At some point it just isn't right to send them out to help.
- If we decide to try something and it's not working (e.g. the beach restoration project), we need to move on earlier and give resources to the projects and people who want them.
- Revenue and Costs
  - There are only so many ways to bring in local revenue. We can raise taxes, spend less, or grow. We need to focus on bringing in new development in the areas of the town that are ripe for it (North Scituate and Greenbush). That will give us resources to address some of the issues on the coast.
  - We need to appropriate money on an annual basis for foreshore protection.
  - Public money should be spent on things that provide public benefit.
  - Summer residents, who pay high taxes, feel disenfranchised in town politics and decisions. We need to find a better way to involve them.
  - Most of the taxpayers live inland. We (inland residents) do care about the coast. It's a big part of why we live in Scituate. We are willing to pay for things that keep the whole community and economy strong. We just don't want to pay to protect one person's house.
- Land use policies
  - The real issue on our coast is overdevelopment. There was a time when you were not allowed to build a big, expensive home on the coast, It wasn't hard to rebuild beach shacks and no one worried about insuring them. Then zoning (or some other policy) changed. We need policies that undo that mistake.
  - We should end our policies to grandfather in pre-existing, non-conforming structures.
  - We need to designate high-hazard flood zones
- Communication/engagement
  - It's all about education and communication. We need to do a better job of asking questions, listening to each other, and explaining things clearly and concisely.
  - We need outside help to bridge some of the divides between the leadership and the community. We are not listening to each other and it's breeding distrust. Our public meetings are not productive.
  - People in the community need to talk to each other about what they think should happen to make us safer. But we don't. We're too polite to each other's faces, then all the anger and frustration comes out online and in public meetings.

- People need to understand that “the town” is all of us. We have leaders, but they’re not “the town.” We are. We need to take responsibility for what is going on and complain less and do more.
- The neighborhood groups and the Coastal Coalition are doing a great job with communications. The town should find ways to work with them rather than trying to duplicate their efforts.
- Solutions to explore
  - Seawalls – improve the ones we have; build more; remove some that are existing and replace with something else
  - Beach nourishment
  - Wave attenuation devices (many people showed interest in exploring this option)
  - Big breakwater out in the harbor
  - Hurricane barrier
  - More parks and open space along the water
  - Dikes
  - Off-shore reef systems
  - A tidal energy mechanism on the North River or South River like the one they have at Mass Maritime
  - Seek opportunities to work with local research institutions like Woods Hole, Harvard, and MIT
  - Programs for low-income families to have generators
  - Managed retreat: This topic was raised by most interviewees, with a large range of perspectives and questions about it, such as:
    - It is so complex. We want everyone to stay. They are part of our community and economy. But we don’t want them to be unsafe.
    - How can the town survive if it loses that tax base?
    - When is the right time to relocate?
    - What about all the infrastructure that serves the neighborhoods that might retreat? How long do you maintain it? When do you stop putting resources into it?
    - Retreat cannot be done piecemeal or house-by-house. It should be a coordinated effort that doesn’t destroy the community little by little.
    - Who would take a buyout if the money was there?
    - How can we talk about it?
    - Can we find places for people on the coast to relocate within the town?
    - Leaders are too conflict-averse to discuss this.
    - We need to be creative about maintaining the tax base. Our options are to raise taxes on everyone else, create more density, attract more businesses, relocate people within the town, or annex more land. We should talk about all of those things.
- Hot spots: This is a list of specific locations that came up in interviews as key areas of concern.
  - Fourth Cliff
  - National Grid infrastructure
  - Anywhere that is high ground, but with access that gets cut off when it floods

- Water treatment plant
- Carnival area

### *Help from regional, state, and federal governments*

Both leaders and members of the community spoke of needing more (and different) support from regional entities and state and federal governments. Again, these ideas were distinct and specific, lending themselves to a starting list to provoke further thought and discussion. They include:

- Form partnerships with other municipalities dealing with similar coastal issues for the purpose of learning from each other and potentially sharing resources.
- State and federal governments should be more committed to the standards only they can enforce, particularly any that impact public health at the local level; for example, building and maintaining septic tanks.
- Although zoning is a local matter, it is complicated by state and federal policies that enable development patterns and building practices that make communities more vulnerable. For example, federal flood insurance makes it possible for people to rebuild in places that the local municipality would like to transition to an undeveloped buffer zone.
- Scituate has spent a lot of money on permits for projects that may or may not have community support. The order of operations is backwards. We should save our money for permitting until we have had a chance to vet the project.
- There should be one body for permits, or one process for getting all the permits needed from the different bodies.
- If federal assistance to rebuild after storms is going to be available, it should be used to build things back correctly and more resilient, not just to the standard it was before the damage. That doesn't do anyone any good.
- It's good for Boston that they are now focusing so much on resilience, but it might be bad for Scituate. If we go up against Boston for federal and state resources, that money will go to Boston.
- Coastal Zone Management (CZM) has too much power.
- Now that politicians are constantly talking about climate change, we should leverage that and ask them to help us receive funding for pilot projects and other experiments that might help other communities.

### Emergency Management

One notable outcome of the interviews was that almost everyone talked about emergency response during storms, even though the interview questions were geared toward longer-term, non-emergent aspects of Scituate's coastal vulnerabilities. As the feedback above demonstrates, people in Scituate are thinking hard about Scituate's resilience in the long-run, but they also live day to day with varying levels of anxiety about the next storm and how Scituate will fare. Many, many people shared stories of living through storms and expressed their fear that someone might, again, be hurt or killed in Scituate by the water, heavy debris, electrocution from downed power lines, or freezing without electricity. Also, many people mentioned the emergency workers and the need to keep them out of harm's way when possible. Although somewhat tangential to the intended focus of this

assessment, the following feedback, and the associated recommendation, have been included to remain true to frequency and intensity of the interviewees' perspectives on the issue.

During emergencies, residents and businesses in Scituate are reportedly dependent on a complex, multi-pronged emergency response organism that includes official, centrally-coordinated activities and an impressive range of informal, voluntary actions that have developed over time to keep people safe. Most notably, the volunteer organization, SANDS, appears to play an outsized public service role during emergencies, as do various neighborhood associations and local civic organizations, including the Scituate Coastal Coalition.

The vast majority of comments were positive; focusing on the clear communications received from the town, SANDS, or other local civic organizations. Several people said neighbors call each other to make sure they are prepared. Many said they make special efforts to call people who are new to the area and have not experienced a winter storm because, as they said, "people have *no idea* how bad it is," and "you can't imagine it until you have lived through it."

The interviews suggest that most people with homes on the coast evacuate when they are advised to do so. There appears to be a strong cultural norm to leave, which has developed over the years in large part because the long-time residents work very hard to convince their neighbors to go. Still, interviewees said almost every storm someone waits too long and the police end up getting involved in dangerous rescue efforts. Police have both the training (e.g. they have divers) and the equipment (e.g. high-water military-grade vehicles) to help, so they are asked to help. Many people talked about their concern for the safety of first responders and their hope that efforts will continue to impress upon residents the risk they create for others when they choose to stay in their homes during storms.

Also, during storms, the town opens a shelter, which is staffed almost entirely by volunteers. Businesses in the area sometimes donate food to the shelter, particularly businesses in the harbor that will lose product they can't keep refrigerated when the power goes out, or when they get flooded. People said the local shelter can remain open for approximately 48 hours, but with an all-volunteer staff and limited resources, the soft policy is to move anyone still in need of shelter after that time to a regional emergency shelter in Weymouth or Plymouth.

After the storms the town again mobilizes a diverse group of people to help with clean up, coordinated at the local level through the Department of Public Works. Their first priorities are often to clear roads of trees that have come down and the material that gets thrown up from waves and wind. This process can take days or weeks. Other critical infrastructure must be checked and repaired, if necessary, including power (under the purview of National Grid); seawalls and revetments; septic and sewer systems; etc. Of course individual property owners also begin the process of storm recovery. If the damage is minimal they take care of it with their own means. If the damage is significant,

they may start the process to file insurance claims or, in worse case scenarios, start the process with FEMA for post-disaster recovery funds.

Overall, the emergency response appears to run smoothly, but interviews revealed a great deal of anxiety about weaknesses in the system and strong desires to shore up the process with stronger administrative infrastructure and designated resources. The system is too dependent, people reported, on the availability and good will of volunteers. One volunteer, for example, does not go on vacation January through March in case a storm arises and the person is needed. Record keeping also appears to be insufficient, as a great deal of the knowledge about who does what, when, and where resides only in key individuals' heads. While the Board of Health leads the sheltering effort, there are almost no paid town employees to staff it, so it is entirely dependent on voluntary help. One of the main challenges with sheltering is dealing with the endless possible needs that come with caring for everyone from infants to the elderly in one place. What if one person needs assistance using the bathroom while another person at the same time can't find her medication? Who is more entitled to the limited private spaces – a nursing mother or someone with a mental illness who is sensitive to crowds? Interviewees with experience in these emergencies cited these and myriad other situations that might arise, and expressed concern that most of the people available to manage them are untrained and uncompensated, or may simply have been working for 36 hours without rest because no one else was available to spell them.

## Recommendations

The Consensus Building Institute (CBI) has worked with a number of municipalities and regional collaborations on issues related to coastal or riverine challenges. Drawing on that experience and our knowledge of the Scituate community as revealed through the assessment, we offer the following recommendations.

### **1) Through a robust community engagement process, develop and adopt a long-term coastal resilience vision and strategy.\***

The Town of Scituate has a hard road ahead to become more resilient to coastal impacts. In some important ways, however, Scituate is in an enviable position, relative to other communities with similar challenges. Most importantly, Scituate has a much more robust understanding of its own vulnerabilities than many places. Also, many of the options the town might pursue to address those vulnerabilities have been studied, along with their costs, and you have been given several recommendations from reputable sources. Town staff are aware of resources from the federal government to support the implementation of projects that will strengthen the town's resilience. There are institutions and partners that are invested in your success, such as MAPC, CZM, CBI, and others, who will help as they are able. The missing piece is a community-developed, community-supported long-term strategy to guide the town's next steps.

We recommend that the town convene, with professional assistance, a collaborative, transparent process with a working group of stakeholders representing the broad range of views held by Scituate residents, businesses, and town staff, to develop this vision and strategy. In broad strokes, we suggest this process be undertaken in the following phases:

- **Phase 1** (2-3 months)
  - Appoint one or two Selectmen to take the lead on this effort, then deputize the Coastal Advisory Commission to oversee the process, on behalf of the Board of Selectmen.
  - Develop a scope of work for professional assistance. This should be a team with both facilitation/collaboration expertise and technical capacities to conduct additional cost/impact analyses on the resilience options already identified in previous studies.
  - Conduct a search and contract with the right partner
- **Phase 2** (2 months)
  - Recruit the community-based stakeholders for the working group. This should be done through a process that is open and transparent to the public. The group should include people who represent residents from various parts of the town; business/non-profit owners, managers, and employees; key town government functions, such as planning and economic development; and others as determined in the scoping process. The point person (or people) from the Board of Selectmen should be actively engaged with this group, as well.

- Convene the working group and gain consensus on its objectives, deliverables, timeline, and governance protocols.
- **Phase 3** (9 months)
  - The working group, led by the consultant team under the direction of the CAC, becomes familiar with the key results of work-to-date on Scituate's coastal vulnerabilities and opportunities, particularly the recommended strategies and actions. (If Recommendation 2, below, is accepted by the Town of Scituate, and it is completed before the working group convenes, it will make this step much less time-consuming and costly.)
  - The working group develops a vision for the Scituate coast, drawing on work-to-date and additional outreach to the public.
  - They determine key benchmarks to achieve the vision.
  - They agree on a method for evaluating options.
  - They review options and proposed actions in depth, engaging the broader community at key points in the discussion.
- **Phase 4** (2 months)
  - The working group finalizes its plan and vision and shares it with the public.
  - The Board of Selectmen accept/adopt the plan
  - CAC assumes leadership of the implementation of the plan.

\* It is anticipated that this group will choose, as one of its priority areas of focus, protecting and supporting the harbor business district. For this reason we have not included an independent recommendation to develop a long-term strategy for the business district. If this whole-coast vision and strategy process is not undertaken, we strongly recommend instead a similar process to the one detailed here, but focused primarily on the harbor.

**2) Review, summarize, and present in a simple format, the key actions that have been taken in recent years to improve coastal resilience in Scituate, and the relevant recommendations that have been made in previous studies and plans.**

One easily remedied problem identified through the interviews is the absence of a single source of information about what is already known about Scituate's coastal challenges and potential solutions. Scituate has done a lot to look at its own vulnerabilities and options, and to take action on some of that information, but few people know that, and those who do are not confident they know everything, or how they would verify whether they are missing anything. Thus, we suggest an effort to compile and summarize the most useful data and recommendations from recent studies, the efforts and results of coastal resilience actions (such as building seawalls or trying to get easements for beach renourishment), and any policies or ordinances that may have been attempted and/or passed. Some of the studies CBI is aware of, that should be included in this summary effort include:

- *Building a Resilient Scituate, Climate Vulnerability Assessment and Action Plan.* MAPC, March 2018

- *Coastal Erosion, Sediment Transport, and Prioritization Management Strategy Assessment for Shoreline Protection*. Applied Coastal, 2016
- *Flood Resilience for Riverine and Coastal Communities. Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities*. Scituate, MA. Next Steps Memorandum. 2016. EPA
- *Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan*. VHB, 2016
- *Sea Level Rise Study for the Towns of Marshfield, Duxbury, Scituate, MA*. Kleinfelder, 2013
- *South Shore Coastal Hazards Adaptation Study*. MAPC, 2011

This summary of actions, data, and recommendations would be useful for town leadership and others, including the Town Administrator, Board of Selectmen, Coastal Advisory Commission, Planning and Economic Development, and various civic organizations that are committed to working on coastal issues. As noted previously, it would also dramatically reduce the time and money required for the first steps of the strategic effort described in Recommendation #1. We recommend the town hire an outside entity with a combination of analytic and graphic skills to conduct this simple review and produce a brief (less than five pages), nicely-designed, summary piece that would help get everyone on the same page about what has been accomplished already, and what is on the table for consideration.

### **3) Convene community conversations about managed retreat**

As articulated in the assessment report, there is a lot of curiosity about whether and how Scituate should think about a managed retreat strategy in some places along the coast. There are also important voices in town that strongly oppose the approach, and they should be heard. Conversations around this topic, including its pros and cons for Scituate, are already happening in various unstructured spaces – around dinner tables, among friends, and online. At some point the issue is likely to be brought to the attention of town leadership, perhaps in a public forum or other venue, forcing town leadership to respond. We recommend the town take a proactive approach to this sensitive topic by supporting the convening of a series of small-group conversations, likely at the neighborhood or street level at the beginning, then broadening to cross-neighborhood dialogues later. These conversations would not, at first, be focused on problem solving, and might need to be conducted with some degree of confidentiality. They might at first aim to educate people who are not familiar with the topic on what managed retreat entails, where it has been used before, and how it has affected people and communities both positively and negatively. At the beginning the conversations would be focused on listening and learning from one another, not trying to come to any conclusions or recommendations. This approach would allow the community, including members and leaders, to gain a baseline understanding of what the community thinks about managed retreat and whether, or under what circumstances, it might be a viable option to consider as part of the town's overall coastal resilience strategy.

### **4) Review, update, and document the emergency management protocols for coastal storms.**

As described in the assessment, the Scituate community is very pleased with the good work performed during previous storms by municipal officials, staff, and volunteers. Their efforts have, for the most part, kept people out of harm's way and assisted them in various ways as they wait out the storm. This work meets critical needs, but it may not be sustainable due to insufficient resources, lack of documentation, and the need for greater support from leadership. We recommend that the key players involved in emergency management be supported in an effort to review their processes, identify gaps that need additional support, and formally document the work needed to keep people safe. This effort would include key representatives from the Fire Department and Emergency Management, Police, Department of Public Works, the Board of Health, Planning and Economic Development, SANDS, and others deemed appropriate. We encourage engagement with the various neighborhood associations, the Scituate Coastal Coalition, the Scituate Harbor Business Association, and other relevant civic organizations in this process. Again, we recommend hiring professional assistance to guide and facilitate this process.