

## Town of Groton Starts Planning for Climate Changes

*Syma A. Ebbin*

As international consensus on climate change science has coalesced and urgency over potential impacts has mounted, communities all over the world have been grappling with this new unprecedented threat. With little federal guidance over the past decade, states and municipalities have been left to ponder their own paths through a thicket of information, a deluge of media bites, and a hailstorm of opinions.

We are entering a time when climate change concern is reaching a tipping point in the policy process. A diverse array of climate change initiatives are underway, accompanied by an ever-increasing number of reports.

Businesses are jumping on the bandwagon, touting their “sustainable,” “green,” and “carbon-neutral” products and activities. Climate web sites and information portals are popping up like mushrooms after a hard rain. So the stage has been set to actually DO SOMETHING. The State of Connecticut has developed a Climate Change Action Plan, calling for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, and working groups are developing adaptation strategies, but so far no policies have extended mandates to the cities and towns in Connecticut.

The Town of Groton, in southeastern Connecticut, has taken a first step by beginning to plan for climate change. But what’s a coastal town to do? In December, 2008, the Groton Town Council established a Task Force on Climate Change and Sustainable Community. Town Councilor and environmental lawyer Paulann Sheets took the lead in creating the task force and in pushing its charter through the town government. Paulann’s impetus to catalyze efforts around the issue of climate change within the town arose from her perception that “as a society we are at a tipping point, a point where we must do something.”

I first met Paulann about seven years ago at the annual meeting of the Connecticut Fund for the Environment (CFE). I had been working for that organization as their open space project coordinator and researcher. Although not a CFE staff attorney, Paulann had worked with them on several environmental cases, including cases involving effluent discharges of the pharmaceutical company Pfizer, Navy dredging



The development along Pine Island Bay in Groton, Connecticut, provides a good example of a coastal area that is vulnerable to climate change impacts and associated sea level rise. Note the area’s low elevation, and minimal setbacks. In the background is the Groton/New London Airport.

and spent fuel rod storage at the Millstone nuclear power plant. Paulann lives in Groton, as did I, we became friends and have since worked together on several projects.

The nine-member Task Force had a two-year charter from the Town Council, beginning in December 2008. Their mandate was to “identify the needs and opportunities to take action as individuals and as a town to avoid or reduce adverse impacts from climate change and rising energy costs while seizing economic opportunities created by them.” Specifically the Task Force set out to assess the carbon footprint of Groton, identify the future trajectory and impacts of sea level rise on the town, investigate other municipal efforts along the same lines, and to report back to the Town Council with a plan of action. They were given authority to hold public hearings, propose grant applications and make recommendations to the Town Council.

The Task Force members met at least monthly. Our first recommendation was that the town join ICLEI, an international organization of local governments. Next we urged the town to apply for a federal Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block grant from the Department of Energy. The Task Force assisted the town in preparing their application, which was successful and yielded a \$198,000 grant to conduct a carbon footprint analysis, and energy benchmarking of town

buildings. It also included money to hire a consultant to help develop an town-wide energy efficiency and conservation strategy, and initiate energy efficiency retrofits on two town buildings. In 2010, the town hired two summer interns from UConn to complete the carbon footprint and benchmarking exercises and report on their work.

Serendipitously, shortly after the Task Force was formed, the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection, with ICLEI, applied for and received an EPA grant to work specifically with the Town of Groton on climate change adaptation. This group held a series of workshops in Groton, inviting a broad array of federal, state and local stakeholders to the table to discuss climate change impacts and adaptation strategies.

In the summer of 2010, the Task Force held a series of four public meetings to which were invited town residents, staff, appointed and elected officials, businesses and other groups to present their ideas on what Groton should do to mitigate and to adapt to climate change. More than 40 individuals spoke, presenting over a hundred ideas which ranged from incorporating low impact development techniques and Smart Growth principles, to using alternative energy sources and enhancing energy conservation. The ideas were entered into a spreadsheet and then the Task Force rated them on cost, performance and risk criteria. This information and its analysis will be included in the final report of the Task Force to the Town Council.

So quite a lot has been accomplished in a period just shy of two years. Still, Paulann Sheets would like to see that the Task Force has its charter extended by the Council so it can continue to plan for the future. At the same time, she sees the need to strengthen the group and provide it with some resources so it can engage more substantively with climate change issues as they arise. She'd like to see the town's education system get more involved in the future.

What's clear is that planning for climate change is a process that will never be completed. It will have to be an ongoing part of our community's fabric and future, for being resilient as a community means anticipating and being prepared for change, whatever those changes may be, and decreasing our vulnerabilities in a fair and equitable manner. Ultimately, resilience will not be about stability and recovery to some previous state of being, but rather about flexibility and adaptation, being able to reinvent ourselves in order to persist. Groton has taken an initial step in this direction, but this is one step in a journey that will never end.

Syma A. Ebbin is a Groton resident and Vice Chair of the Task Force. She is Connecticut Sea Grant's Research Coordinator.

## Sea Grant Coastal Management Fellow to Help Puerto Rico Assess Climate Change Variability

Kasey R. Jacobs, Connecticut Sea Grant's NOAA Coastal Management Fellow, has been placed with the Puerto Rico Coastal Zone Management Program in the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources under Director Ernesto L. Diaz. During the next two years, Jacobs will be coordinating the development of the Puerto Rico Coastal Hazards-Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment and Adaptation Strategy. She says she will use these methods:



Kasey Jacobs

(1) multi-stakeholder facilitation techniques to foster collaboration among 85 Puerto Rican experts; (2) spatial analyses using GIS and Remote Sensing to identify the most vulnerable coastal communities and ecosystems; (3) participatory risk assessments of key Puerto Rican economic and ecological assets; and (4) adaptation strategy identification, assessment, and prioritization.

Originally from Long Island, New York, Kasey completed her Bachelor of Science in Environmental Science Biology from Southampton College. In 2007 she moved to New Haven, Connecticut to work as Program Coordinator for Citizens Campaign for the Environment and later to attend graduate school at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. For completion of her master's degree. Kasey conducted field research on climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction in West Sumatra, Indonesia and interned for Mercy Corps Indonesia.

Kasey's non-professional activities all seem to involve water. They include swimming, SCUBA diving, underwater photography, and when possible, figure skating. Currently she lives in San Juan and spends her free time making new friends, practicing speaking Spanish, and exploring local areas via mass transportation. Kasey hopes to begin teaching free swimming lessons in the spring to local *Puertorriquenos*. You can keep up with her by reading her blog at [www.kaseypuertorico.blogspot.com](http://www.kaseypuertorico.blogspot.com).

—Peg Van Patten