



## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Lea Hitchen (Town of Portsmouth, RI); Patricia Reynolds (City of Newport, RI); Ronald Wolanski (Town of Middletown, RI)

**FROM:** SNEP Network Project Team (Throwe Environmental, Elizabeth Scott Consulting); Rhode Island Infrastructure Bank

**CC:** New England Environmental Finance Center, Naval Station Newport

**RE:** Aquidneck Island Climate Resilience Leadership Exchange: Summary of Findings

**DATE:** September 29, 2023

The SNEP Network Project Team, in partnership with the Rhode Island Infrastructure Bank and the island's municipal resilience teams, hosted three workshops as part of the Aquidneck Island Climate Resilience Leadership Exchange in April, May, and June 2023. At the Leadership Exchange workshops, state and local experts discussed important topics pertinent to addressing common concerns and building climate resilience on Aquidneck Island including stormwater and water resources, emergency management and preparedness, and transportation. These discussions led to the identification of next steps, project bundles, and funding opportunities. The communities look forward to using a regional approach to address climate resilience moving forward. This memorandum serves to convey the summary of findings from each session of the Exchange, including key takeaways and next steps.

### Background and Purpose.

As a follow-up to recent resilience work completed at the direction of the SNEP Network, Project Team partners at Throwe Environmental (TE) and Elizabeth Scott Consulting, along with the Rhode Island Infrastructure Bank (RIIB), provided technical assistance through an initiative called the Aquidneck Island Climate Resilience Leadership Exchange (hereafter called the Leadership Exchange). The purpose of the Leadership Exchange was to provide additional capacity, guidance, and support to coordinate island-wide priorities as it relates to climate resilience project needs and explore funding and financing opportunities necessary for implementation.

Planning for the Leadership Exchange began in the early spring of 2023, following the completion of SNEP climate resilience projects for Portsmouth and Newport, with a similar project underway in

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Middletown. The goal of the Leadership Exchange was to begin or reignite conversations of overlapping priorities among the island municipalities and forge a path forward for improved regional coordination on high priority topics.

The Leadership Exchange was a three-part workshop series that sought to bring together local experts, municipal leadership, and other stakeholders to advance climate resilience across the Island. The SNEP Project Team, RIIB’s Aquidneck Island Regional Resilience Coordinator, and the Aquidneck Island Municipal Resilience Teams, worked together to develop agendas, identify experts and leadership to invite to the Exchange, and facilitate three separate workshops focused on stormwater and water resources, emergency management and preparedness, and transportation.

The goal of the Leadership Exchange was to provide an inclusive process for advancing on-the-ground, climate resilient infrastructure projects within each municipality and regionally across the island. The Exchange achieved this by facilitating discussions around shared interests and benefits leading to project bundles with increased impact and efficiency, identifying funding and financing opportunities best suited for identified projects, and adding capacity to coordinate strategic planning and implementation.

The primary outcome of the Leadership Exchange was reopening lines of communication amongst island-wide leadership and an informal agreement between the municipalities and Naval Station Newport (NAVSTA Newport) to coordinate regional efforts to increase regional resilience. Each session of the Leadership Exchange provided specific next steps associated with addressing pressing regional climate and environmental challenges.

## Summary of Findings.

### *Leadership Exchange 1: Stormwater and Water Resources*

**Overview.** The first of three Leadership Exchanges, focusing on Stormwater and Water Resources, took place at Middletown Town Hall on April 21, 2023 and was attended by 22 participants. The three municipalities each face their own unique problems regarding stormwater flooding and water quality, however a shared drinking water system and shared water resources make it difficult for each municipality to mitigate these issues on their own. Chronic algal and cyanobacteria blooms, bacteria and nutrient related impacts, and stormwater-induced flooding are shared concerns that should be addressed in concert across municipal lines. During this session, each municipality shared updates on recent projects relating to stormwater management and shared future opportunities for collaboration and joint project implementation.

<u>Participating Organizations</u>		
Aquidneck Island Planning Commission	Newport City Council	Rhode Island General Assembly
Aquidneck Land Trust	Newport Planning Department	Save the Bay
Middletown Building and Zoning Department	Newport Public Works	University of Rhode Island Coastal Resources Center
Middletown Planning Department	Newport Tree Conservancy	
Middletown Department of Public Works	Portsmouth Emergency Management	
	Portsmouth Planning Department	

**Key Takeaways.** The following key takeaways emerged from the first Leadership Exchange event:

- ***Educate the Public.*** One of the primary needs identified during this session was public education. The municipalities identified lack of public understanding surrounding stormwater and water quality projects as a primary barrier to accessing more sustainable revenue streams. It was determined that public education would be an essential component of future stormwater related projects.
- ***Engage Private Property Owners.*** The municipalities identified the need to engage private property owners in stormwater management and water quality initiatives, as improvements on state and local roads and facilities alone are not enough to address the island's flooding and water quality problems. Addressing resilience in this area can be done through incentives and requirements to reduce impervious cover and improve stormwater management on private property. Ideas discussed included creating guidelines for mitigating stormwater impacts on private properties, public-private partnerships (P3s), and creation/adoption of green infrastructure design/installation/maintenance certification programs.
- ***Expand and Improve Regional Coordination.*** The municipalities agreed that a regional approach to stormwater management would prove to be much more cost effective compared to current methods. However, moving forward on a regional water quality protection fund, as well as other regionalized efforts, will again require dedicated public outreach and education to overcome misconceptions and garner support.

**Recommended Next Steps.** The project team recommends the following next steps to advance the findings of the first Leadership Exchange event:

- ***Incorporate public education into future water quality infrastructure projects.*** Having one Island-wide voice delivering a unified message across projects will lead to both increased efficiency and effectiveness of public education initiatives. Additionally, incorporating aspects of island-wide community education and engagement into grant proposals will increase the scale of proposed project impacts, making these proposals more attractive to state and federal funders.
- ***Explore regional approaches to stormwater and water quality management, including a regional water quality protection fund.*** Current federal funding opportunities are looking to fund larger, regional projects. Aquidneck Island will be much more competitive on a national scale with applications that put forth island-wide projects, as opposed to projects in individual municipalities. Additionally, exploring an island-wide fee dedicated to stormwater, water quality, or climate resilience, would leverage existing funding and allow for investment at scale to achieve successful implementation of high priority projects.
- ***Identify opportunities for project bundling across municipalities.*** To demonstrate proof of concept and success for regional coordination, the municipalities can work with the Aquidneck Island Regional Resilience Coordinator to bundle smaller projects for RIIB's upcoming round of Municipal Resilience Program (MRP) action grants. Additional larger grants should follow.
- ***Develop a regional Stormwater and Water Quality Action Plan.*** The plan should identify opportunities for municipalities to work in tandem and address regional assets, such as the drinking water system.

## Leadership Exchange Session 2: Emergency Management and Preparedness

**Overview.** The second session of the Leadership Exchange focused on emergency management and preparedness across the Island and took place at Portsmouth Town Hall on May 24, 2023. This workshop was attended by 20 participants. Due to the small size of Aquidneck Island communities' staff, emergency managers often "wear multiple hats", serving as both emergency responders and emergency planners. The part time nature of emergency planning activities and relatively short tenures of emergency managers (typically the Fire Chief) pose challenges in establishing a more comprehensive emergency management plan. Following a presentation of individual actions undertaken by the municipalities and Naval Station Newport, participants heard from leaders from the Barnstable County (MA) Regional Emergency Management Committee, made up of 16 communities. Informed by this regional case study, the participants then engaged in a discussion identifying future needs and next steps.

<u>Participating Organizations</u>		
Aquidneck Island Planning Commission	Middletown Town Council	Portsmouth Emergency Management
Barnstable County, MA Department of Health and Environment	Middletown Planning Department	Portsmouth Police Department
Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island	Naval Station Newport	Rhode Island Emergency Management Agency
Exeter, RI Emergency Management	Newport Fire Department	Rhode Island General Assembly
Middletown Fire Department	Newport Police Department	
	Portsmouth Business Development	
	Portsmouth Planning Department	

**Key Takeaways.** The following key takeaways emerged from the second Leadership Exchange event:

- **Limited Capacity and Competing Priorities.** Due to limited capacity, emergency managers in Newport and Middletown must "wear multiple hats", filling a variety of roles with competing priorities. In this dynamic, emergency planning is frequently overlooked while emergency managers focus their efforts on response.
- **Lack of a Central Emergency Operations Center.** The lack of a centralized emergency management hub on the Island forces the municipalities to act in silos. However, the municipalities have a strong record of coordinating with the State during emergency events. A Mutual Aid Agreement signed by all Aquidneck Island communities some time ago could serve as a template for a future agreement.
- **Funding Limitations.** To overcome the challenge of limited individual resources, emergency management and preparedness on the Island must be a coordinated effort between the three municipalities, NAVSTA Newport, and the state.

**Recommended Next Steps.** The project team recommends the following next steps to advance the findings of the second Leadership Exchange event:

- ***Develop an Island-wide Emergency Management Plan.*** Identify capacity building and/or planning funding to hire a contractor to develop a detailed Regional Emergency Plan on behalf of the municipalities and NAVSTA Newport. The plan could include, for example, development of a regional emergency planning committee, a detailed and actionable regional sheltering plan, and the framework to develop a centralized Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to serve as a hub for training, shared equipment storage, sheltering, and resource sharing.
- ***Identify new sheltering locations for emergency sheltering events.*** Currently, shelters on the island do not have sufficient capacity. The community must identify additional locations to serve as shelters during an emergency event and ensure these locations will be able to provide the necessary protection for residents, tourists, and workers.
- ***Increase volunteer recruitment and training.*** Coordinated island-wide outreach to increase volunteer recruitment for emergency shelters.

### **Leadership Exchange Session 3: Transportation**

**Overview.** The third and final session of the Aquidneck Island Climate Resilience Leadership Exchange centered around the topic of transportation and took place at Innovate Newport on June 14, 2023 and was attended by 15 participants. Roads on the island vary in ownership from the Navy-owned Burma Road, to state-owned East Main and West Main Roads, to other locally-owned roads traversing the island. There are also four bridges connecting the island with the mainland: the Newport Pell Bridge, the Mount Hope Bridge, the Jamestown Verazzano Bridge, and the Sakonnet River Bridge, all owned and operated by the Rhode Island Turnpike and Bridge Authority (RITBA). These complexities in ownership can often lead to complicated coordination needs for project implementation.

<u>Participating Organizations</u>		
Aquidneck Island Planning Commission	Newport Planning Department	Rhode Island Department of Transportation
Bike Newport	Portsmouth Business Development	Rhode Island Division of Statewide Planning
Middletown Bike and Pedestrian Advisory Committee	Portsmouth Emergency Management	Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc.
Middletown Planning Department	Portsmouth Planning Department	
Naval Station Newport	Portsmouth Police Department	
Newport Bike and Pedestrian Advisory Committee		

**Key Takeaways.** The following key takeaways emerged from the third Leadership Exchange event:

- ***Regional Coordination Makes all Municipalities More Competitive.*** The intricate relationship between the three municipalities, the Navy, and the state can provide immense opportunity in regards to transportation. According to a representative from the Rhode Island Department of Transportation (RIDOT), regional coordination and collaborative approaches to project implementation make municipalities much more competitive for grant funding at both the state and federal level.
- ***Project Planning Achieved Through Collaboration.*** By working together to collaboratively develop transportation plans that account for federal, state, and local priorities, the municipalities can identify projects that allow for efficiency and effectiveness while lessening competition for limited state and federal resources.
- ***Prioritize Multimodal Transportation Options.*** For Aquidneck Island’s transportation network to become more resilient, the focus must be placed on multimodal forms of transportation and “Green and Complete Streets” that simultaneously reduce emissions and congestion while increasing the absorption of stormwater runoff from paved surfaces.
- ***Recovery Includes Future Resilience Planning.*** While many opportunities for the Island to become more resilient exist now, community planners should constantly be looking for new opportunities to advance resilience. For this reason, resilience and the concept of “building back better” should be a focus during the recovery phase of emergency events. By incorporating resilience into emergency response and recovery, the Island can create efficiencies that may not otherwise exist.

**Recommended Next Steps.** The project team recommends the following next steps to advance the findings of the third Leadership Exchange event:

- ***Evaluate opportunities to expand multimodal transportation at the Newport Gateway Center and new Satellite lot.*** These opportunities may be able to tie in Burma Road, which is currently Navy-owned and maintained.
- ***Evaluate opportunities to bury utility lines.*** This can be paired with opportunities to widen roadways or add bike lanes or green infrastructure to existing roadways.
- ***Municipalities (and the Navy, when appropriate) should approach local, state, and federal funders collaboratively to increase competitiveness for funding and decrease local competition.*** One potential funder includes the van Buren Charitable Foundation (vBCF), who has already expressed interest in funding community-led resilience initiatives on the Island.

## Conclusion.

The Leadership Exchange workshops proved successful at reigniting conversations with island-wide and state leadership on resilience topics of regional importance. There is an immediate opportunity to expand these efforts to ensure that Aquidneck Island municipalities are well positioned to attain the funding necessary to achieve implementation of climate resilience projects. With immediate priorities already identified (stormwater and water management, emergency management and preparedness, and transportation), and key personnel engaged, the Leadership Exchange presents an opportunity for the municipalities to move forward from planning to action. The Aquidneck Island Regional Resilience Coordinator is aptly positioned to continue these efforts in the following ways:



- Coordinating projects across municipalities;
- Bundling similar projects and/or those of regional significance for grant funding;
- Identifying appropriate personnel to engage; and
- Connecting the municipalities with various sources of federal, state, and local funding.

It is essential that the municipalities fully capitalize on the additional capacity this position provides, and use it to become more competitive, efficient, and resilient well into the future.



*This report was produced by the dedicated team at Throwe Environmental, LLC in the company's role as a core partner within the SNEP Network. Throwe Environmental is committed to developing climate resilience, environmental finance, and policy and governance solutions for its public, private, and nonprofit clients. As a SNEP Network partner organization, Throwe Environmental focuses on financing, training, and leadership development. Throwe Environmental is based in Bristol, RI and helps communities nationwide address their climate challenges.*