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Planners and Climate Change Action: An Approach for Communities

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Planners and others engaged in community development take seriously their responsibility to protect the public's health, welfare, and safety. In a new way, though, global climate change compels local officials to contend with the local and the global at the same time. For example, a planner for a coastal community undoubtedly will have to confront the necessity of removing and relocating critical infrastructure—roads, wastewater treatment plants, or schools, for example—from lands that could likely be inundated by rising sea levels. The planner must recognize also that changes in the growing season and water shortages due to droughts in other regions may make local agricultural land more important than ever before. Similarly, lands once deemed marginal may become exceedingly valuable.

Likewise, there is a temporal aspect of global climate change that ought to be recognized. If a major road is to be relocated, planners and policymakers will

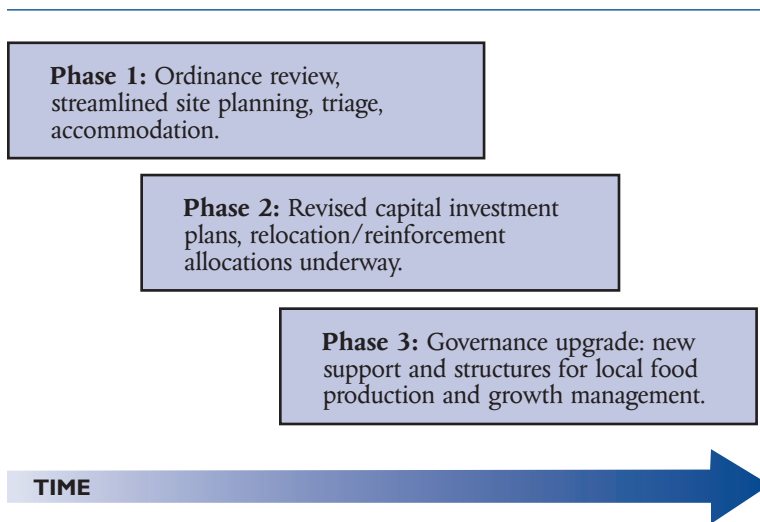
have to contend with shifts in land values and recognize that placement of infrastructure due to relocation will mean other land use changes will also occur. Businesses and firms located along an existing road that will likely be lost to rising seas levels will also need to be relocated. This important change will trigger any number of smaller adjustments, both private and public. It is possible that entire downtowns will be lost and new commercial and service centers will have to be established. This, in turn, will bring about changes in residential development and the everyday patterns of life. Nearly all communities—and not just those located on the coast or in river valleys—will be faced with challenges. But in facing them, time is truly of the essence and a failure to seize the moment could have consequences of unimagined proportions.

This essay is a brief overview of responsibilities local officials must face to ensure that their towns are adequately prepared for the coming challenges. It provides some of the arguments that underlie planners' obligations and suggests a means to categorize necessary responses over time.

CHANGE IS UPON US

Dealing with new or even “fringe” topics is what planners have always done; it is their job to articulate pathways and opportunities that may arise from events and changes not routinely recognized. This role arose in matters of public health—the cholera epidemic of 1836, for example, and the need to keep sewage away from drinking water. In many ways, this public health need will continue well into the future. In Maine, awareness of the overlap between planners and climate change is not new. Back in 1995, for example, planners at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Maine State Planning Office issued a document, *Anticipatory Planning for Sea-Level Rise along the Coast of Maine*, which articulated a variety of topics and issues to be faced if sea levels climb an anticipated average of 66 cm before the end of the current century. Now, however, documents of this type—and efforts by local planners to implement recommendations from them—need to become much more commonplace and mainstream.

FIGURE 1: **A Phased Approach to Local Climate Change Responses**



The field of planning is adjusting to current demands, but there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution. Individual towns have to create individual solutions that meet their own constraints and opportunities without compromising the strategies of adjacent communities. Each community and region should develop its own list of issues to address. Some will be broad, some quite local, while others will be a combination of both. All will call for a variety of responses ranging from specific actions to general adaptation strategies. Critically, planners must keep in mind that every local issue has a regional component and every regional issue has a local dimension.

Although each community must inventory its own resources and concerns, sample issues to be considered will be quite broad and will include loss of sand beach fronts; FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) coordination and authority; rerouted evacuation routes; wildlife population disruption; decreased food security; and increase in number, duration, and severity of extreme weather events. Communities must consider wide-ranging responses including design charettes; insurance program modification; new inter-agency coordination efforts; estuary management; and media relations.

The diversity of these issues and responses underscores both the scale and complexity of climate change initiatives. Because of this complexity, it is prudent to be cautious at the outset in how issues are framed.

Framing should entail selecting those issues with the greatest potential enhancement or threat to public health and welfare. Once a good list of issues is selected, we suggest grouping responses into a *three-phased approach* (Figure 1). This will allow momentum to build from early successes and create a “culture of change.” The first phase is what communities need to do immediately—everything from triage and after-the-fact accommodations to setting streamlined site planning and review procedures. Phase 2 is things that could be undertaken fairly soon, but still might take a few years. Phase 3 is long-term reforms that accommodate a new geography of governance. These are changes such as more localized food production, transportation changes, and new mechanisms for growth management. Certainly some of this can begin in the first few years, but large-scale implementation will be more effective once a culture of change has been established in Phases 1 and 2.

In addition to a temporal structure, this framework provides a few general recommendations. One, do not wait to begin implementation. Two, be prepared for the long haul. Three, learn to see opportunities in situations and structures often viewed as roadblocks. For example, site planning processes are often viewed as roadblocks, both by developers and sometimes by planners trying to stimulate sound development in a town. The imperatives presented by climate change (and sea level rise in particular) present an unprecedented amount of leverage for those trying to streamline site planning processes or achieve any number of other planning objectives. Suddenly, because of demonstrated vulnerabilities of a large shoreline tax base, among other reasons, some arguments to achieve traditional planning objectives may have new or added weight in standard town processes. Planning outcomes can be expected to be accomplished less incrementally.


A phased strategy means some things are to be done immediately; it also means we have some time to think and plan, allowing our decisions to be informed by results of the first phase and by the environmental, political, and economic factors that have already begun to make themselves known (see Colgan and Merrill, this issue). For example, in the process of implementing Phase 1, it will become clear that we need increased local control, increased regional coordination,

increased public involvement, enhanced media relations, and increased education about the benefits of planning. These will inform implementation of Phase 2, along with a suite of new legislative initiatives in state-local relations that are sure to emerge in response to the needed actions.

As we enter Phase 2, we will be observing the consequences of insurers backing away from the coast, the increased dynamics of the physical systems in the landscape, and corresponding repercussions in our social and governmental systems. Immediately these forces draw us into ethical considerations. They show the need to help government officials and the public to deal with the consequences of change and what will happen if we do not prepare. This discussion informs the third phase, which is the incorporation of long-range institutional mechanisms that facilitate an effective, sustainable response to climate change. Phase 3 planning implies initiating community-based conversations about the nature of change and the nature of resilience—that is, what core values do we bring with us and how do we use them to create long-term viable communities?

CONCLUSION

While planners help to point out the nature of the risks, the ranges of solutions, and the types of processes that can lead to solutions, the answers and their implementation have to come from communities themselves. These have always been truisms for planners, but for communities to achieve maximum benefit of planners' capabilities, both the extent and limitations of planners' roles need to be clear. That is, communities need to recognize that although planners can help them adapt to climate change, community organizing around potential climate change solutions must become commonplace. Specifically, public meetings should begin immediately all along the coast to evaluate what individual communities need to do in response to climate change. They should be convened by a panel of representatives from federal, state, and local government offices along with interested nonprofits. The organizing panel could be coordinated by a state agency, such as the Maine State Planning Office. Whatever form these processes take, they should

include local planners as central and strive to cultivate the most creative responses possible. 

REFERENCES

- Colgan, Charles S. and Samuel B. Merrill. 2008. "The Effects of Climate Change on Economic Activity in Maine: Coastal York County Case Study." *Maine Policy Review* 17(2): 66–79.



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