

Marblehead proactively tackles climate change with MVP plan

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Posted Jun 22, 2018 at 12:54 PM

Updated Jun 22, 2018 at 12:54 PM

Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness plan looks at future climate risks

Significant climate changes are predicted to have a major impact on area cities and towns, particularly coastal communities, over the next 50 years. Marblehead is looking to be proactive in addressing the problem.

On Thursday, June 14, town officials and members of the community met at Abbot Hall to discuss a drafted Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) plan. The town has received an MVP grant from the state to assist in preparing for future climate risks and effectively responding to hazards caused by storms, flooding, and erosion.

Back in May, the town held a workshop where approximately 40 stakeholders teamed up to identify and prioritize local climate risks. The major hazards cited for Marblehead were coastal and inland flooding, high winds, and coastal erosion. The MVP plan prioritizes protecting the areas of infrastructure, social assets, and the environment.

Barbara Warren, executive director at Salem Sound Coastwatch, was hired to assist the town in developing the plan. At Thursday's meeting, she discussed the project and what areas (or actions) Marblehead needed to prioritize. She said a finalized plan is due by June 30 and added that the state will call for proposals to fund MVP actions - where a specific area of concern is addressed.

“The state expects towns and cities to update their MVP plans as needed, this could be every year. And [the state] expects the town will take actions every year, or it could lose its MVP designation,” she explained.

Warren pointed out that 14.2 miles of Marblehead is coastline area. Statistics from the Massachusetts Climate Change Clearinghouse and the Northeast Climate Science Center showed that sea levels are projected to experience a 2.7-foot rise by 2050, to go along with an increased frequency of storms such as nor’easters, blizzards, and hurricanes. Annual precipitation could also increase by 53 inches by mid-century.

According to the information provided, high wind events over the period from 2004-2013 caused up to \$1.1 million in damage to Marblehead.

“It’s very important that coastal communities understand the potential impacts of climate change on the town’s infrastructure, societal and environmental assets, and how its residents and businesses may be impacted,” said Warren. “With a prioritized plan of actions, [the town] can identify immediate and long-term opportunities to advance the community’s resilience.”

The top priority area identified in the current plan was to protect two 23-kilowatt underground feeder lines at the Lead Mills Rail Trail. Erosion caused by last winter’s storms has begun to effect the power lines. As a result, it was cited as an immediate need in the MVP plan and should be taken care of before the end of the year, one town official said Thursday.

Warren said the plan seeks to “develop a more resilient, cohesive response to protecting coastal assets while addressing some very real and immediate threats that these hazards have already wrought” on the community.

“The coastal erosion at Lead Mills increased the risk of exposing the two high-voltage feeder lines that deliver Marblehead’s electricity,” she said. “Of course all this will require ongoing public outreach and communication. Without this kind of planning and thinking, projects may be undertaken that create a temporary fix but do nothing for longer term resilience.”

Other areas were designated as high priority in the plan. Warning lights and gates could be installed on the Causeway, which would include placing shelters on both sides of the Neck. As well, finding both short and long-term solutions to

road flooding was noted. Marblehead would work with neighboring towns on this issue.

The repair of public seawalls was also listed as a planned priority, as were both the storm water and sewer infrastructures. This includes evaluating current and future risks at 13 sewer pump stations in town. Maintaining barrier beaches such as Devereux, Riverhead and Preston was noted.

Also included in the plan were efforts to devise a resilient and cohesive response to protect Marblehead Harbor, one that addresses the mix of private and town properties and state and federal regulations. It also calls for reconsidering the construction of a breakwater structure to protect the harbor.

The breakwater subject was brought up at Thursday's meeting. It was pointed out that the idea was seriously contemplated as far back as the 1960s but was never approved. It was said that the proposed MVP plan was "only a bandage" and that "the [flooding and erosion] problems are going to keep happening" unless a barrier is built.

The topic of public safety was raised. One resident said it didn't seem to be addressed that clearly in the plan. Another person emphasized the importance of the urgency behind the preparedness plan.

"We all know climate change is real. How much time do we have to act?," she said. "These things we're talking about here are serious."

Moderate to low priority sites were also identified in the plan draft. They included Fort Sewall, Chandler Hovey Park, and Waterside Cemetery.