

Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness Program Action Grant Case Study

Municipality: Town of Natick, Town of Ashland, City of Framingham

Project Title: MetroWest Climate Equity Project

Award Year (FY): FY22 and FY23

Grant Award: \$127,150

Match: \$45,600

Match Source: In-kind (staff time)

One or Two Year Project: Two Year

Municipal Department Leading Project: Sustainability

Project Website URL: <https://www.mapc.org/resource-library/metro-west-climate-equity/>

Community Overview:

Approximately 128,000 people live in the communities of Natick, Framingham and Ashland, in the heart of an area commonly referred to as MetroWest. Known for its convenient access to major transportation routes and the retail “Golden Triangle” that includes the Natick Mall and Shoppers World, this region is home to many commuters and has a large immigrant population.

Seventy-five percent (95,504 people) of Natick, Framingham and Ashland residents live in Environmental Justice (EJ) neighborhoods, with the majority living in South Framingham. These residents are under-represented in local government, and, prior to this project, neither Natick, Framingham nor Ashland had substantial participation from EJ representatives in their MVP planning workshops, despite the provision of non-English language resources in Framingham. Natick’s voter participation and Town Meeting representation also reflects a lack of engagement with EJ populations. For example, in Natick’s Precinct 1, where several EJ communities are located, voter participation is significantly lower than other precincts and Town Meeting seats are routinely unfilled.

Project Description and Goals:

The municipalities’ long-term goal is to reduce the social, environmental and economic vulnerabilities that disproportionately impact Natick, Framingham and Ashland’s EJ communities and to build local resilience to climate change. However, staff appreciate this is not something that can happen overnight, and sought Action Grant funding to begin the process by pursuing the following, shorter-term goals:

- Build lasting relationships with Metro West Environmental Justice (EJ) communities that will facilitate long-term engagement on climate change resilience and action
- Learn from the community about how they experience climate change and what their climate priorities are, and update local plans and direct funding to reflect findings.
- Increase city and town staff’s knowledge of climate equity through training and improve their capacity to support and engage Environmental Justice communities

As part of the project, the municipalities worked with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council to assemble a team of resident researchers, called Community Climate Liaisons, who co-designed and led Climate Conversations with residents living in EJ neighborhoods to learn about their concerns related to climate change and the challenges they face. The team led two phases of Climate Conversations:

Phase I: Climate Conversations Survey – Liaisons conducted a survey of EJ residents (shared in-person and online) that explored how climate change impacts residents and local climate action. The survey identified four priority areas for local climate action:

- 1) Emergency planning,
- 2) Equitable clean energy & energy efficiency programs,
- 3) Making it easier to get around without a car, and
- 4) Improving access to lakes/ponds to cool off.

Phase II: Climate Action Conversations – Liaisons gathered friends, families, and colleagues to talk about local climate action and resilience. Conversations identified potential solutions within the four priority climate action areas.

Elected and appointed municipal officials and staff were actively involved throughout this process, which kicked-off with a training on Climate Equity. At the conclusion of the project, Community Liaisons shared their findings to local municipal leaders and their presentation was broadcast on local cable access channels.

Results and Deliverables:

- **9 Community Climate Liaisons were hired:** In 2022, the municipalities hired Community Climate Liaisons to lead conversations with residents in at-risk neighborhoods. These individuals were reached through collaborations with local community groups, such as the Framingham ESL Program and Natick for Black Lives Matter.
- **800+ residents participated in a regional survey:** Liaisons created a survey and collected responses. They asked about climate change impacts, what residents do to cope, and ideas for local climate action. Survey participants who learned about the survey from Liaisons were more likely to be people of color than participants who heard about the survey from standard municipal communication channels (e.g., town website, city newsletter).
- **8 Climate Action Conversations were hosted:** Liaisons hosted community gatherings in different languages, with several occurring at liaisons' homes. The conversations focused on priority areas for local climate action and resilience.
- **40+ municipal leaders were trained on climate equity:** Municipal leaders at all levels – staff and volunteers – learned about EJ communities and the importance of including EJ members in local policy work.
- **3 additional grants were pursued:** The municipalities sought funding to deliver quick action on climate priorities identified. Natick and Framingham received a grant from the

National Association of City and County Health Officials (NACCHO) to develop climate and emergency preparedness communication materials for people whose first language is not English. The three communities also successfully applied for TAP funding from MAPC to support this and additional climate preparedness work. A separate grant application was submitted in collaboration with the regional transit agency to improve language accessibility of transit signage.

Lessons Learned:

- Natick, Framingham and Ashland's EJ populations prioritized the following climate action areas: emergency planning, equitable clean energy & energy efficiency programs, making it easier to get around without a car, and improving access to lakes/ponds to cool off.
- Standard municipal communication channels (e.g., website, newsletter, print ad) are not effective at reaching EJ populations or launching new programs targeting EJ communities. Printed materials and direct mail is highly preferable to online communications.
- Working with Community Liaisons is an iterative process, and Liaisons should be brought into all areas of phases of a project. Organizations pursuing a Community Liaison model for their projects, should include bandwidth in their budget and timeline to include time for co-designing aspects of the project (e.g., survey collection approach, outreach plan) with the Liaisons.
- Individualized outreach is more successful in securing Community Liaisons than general promotion. Municipal relationships with CBOs, especially organizations serving people who speak English as a second language, proved to be the most productive at identifying potential Community Liaisons.

Partners and Other Support:

- The Metropolitan Area Planning Council's Public Health team served as consultants for this work and supported the municipalities on all aspects of the project, especially managing the Community Liaisons.
- The municipalities connected with many local community organizations throughout this project. Of these, the most involved partner was the Framingham Adult English as a Second Language program.

Project Photos:

Shown below: Natick and Framingham municipal staff with MAPC Health Director, Barry Keppard, and Community Liaisons at Framingham Adult ESL community partner gathering.



MetroWest Climate Equity Project



Climate Conversations

The Towns of Natick and Ashland and the City of Framingham recognize **climate change will have unequal impacts** and want to **support residents who will be hit hardest by climate change**.

In 2022, the municipalities hired **Community Climate Liaisons to lead conversations with residents** in at-risk neighborhoods.



How did we hear from residents?

9
CLIMATE
LIAISONS

800+
SURVEY
PARTICIPANTS

8
CLIMATE ACTION
CONVERSATIONS

Climate Conversations Survey – Asked about climate change impacts and what residents do to cope. Collected ideas for local climate action.

Climate Action Conversations – Liaisons hosted gatherings of friends, families, and colleagues. In different languages, they talked about priority areas for local climate action and resilience.

Priority Areas for Climate Action


Emergency
preparedness

Energy efficiency
& clean energy




Public transportation,
walking and biking

Clean and
accessible
lakes/ponds

