



Community and Municipal Research Supporting the From Risk to Recovery Conference

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Introduction

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) is hosting a regional emergency preparedness and sustainability conference in direct response to needs identified by municipalities across the North Shore Task Force communities. Focus groups and stakeholder conversations were conducted to better understand these needs and inform the development of the conference. By gathering input from both municipal leaders and residents, MAPC has worked to ensure the conference provides practical, actionable guidance tailored to real-world challenges.

Through this series of conversations and focus groups, common challenges, gaps, and priorities emerged related to emergency preparedness, response, and recovery particularly as communities face increasing climate and public safety risks. Strong connections to sustainability also became evident, helping to shape both the conference content and speaker selection. As a result, the conference features a diverse group of organizations sharing expertise, tools, and best practices, fostering collaboration to strengthen preparedness and sustainability initiatives across the North Shore and beyond.

While the conference is designed primarily for municipal staff, its broader goal is to strengthen local capacity across the region. By improving coordination, sharing resources, and promoting peer learning, communities will be better positioned to protect residents, respond effectively to emergencies, and recover more quickly from disasters.

This effort is led by MAPC's Emergency Preparedness Practice and supported by a Technical Assistance Program (TAP) grant, reflecting MAPC's ongoing commitment to regional collaboration, shared learning, and resilient communities.

Parties Involved

This effort was led by the Emergency Preparedness team at MAPC, with support from Javier Gutierrez, the Director of the Community Engagement Department who led the facilitation and production of the resident surveys with community partners.

Municipal Participants (Focus Groups)

A subset of municipalities participated in structured focus group discussions, with the objective of ensuring representation across a diverse range of community types within the North Shore Task Force. Municipal representatives provided insights into key challenges, priorities, and considerations related to emergency preparedness and sustainability. The following municipalities were represented:

- Rockport
- Salem
- Topsfield
- Nahant
- Peabody

Community Partners (Survey Distribution Sites)

With the support of the Community Engagement Department at MAPC, we engaged a select group of community-based organizations within the North Shore Task Force—particularly those serving populations often disproportionately affected by emergencies—to gather input from residents on their concerns related to emergency preparedness. Through this effort, 72 residents were consulted, and survey responses were collected, including 50 in English and 22 in Spanish. The participating organizations included:

- Pathways for Children (Gloucester)
- Pathways for Children (Salem)
- Pathways for Children (Beverly)
- Salem Food Pantry

Municipal Focus Groups

Across all participating municipalities, several consistent themes emerged, alongside community-specific challenges. Through structured discussions, municipal staff shared their perspectives on emergency preparedness, highlighting both common concerns across the region and issues unique to their communities. These conversations provided valuable context for understanding risks, identifying gaps in resources and capacity, and exploring opportunities for regional coordination. The key themes that emerged are summarized below.

Key Regional Themes

- **Climate and Coastal Vulnerability:** Communities, particularly Rockport, Salem, and Nahant, highlighted significant concerns around coastal flooding, sea level rise, and storm impacts. Critical infrastructure, including wastewater facilities, seawalls, and utilities, are often located in high-risk coastal areas, increasing vulnerability.
- **Infrastructure and Utilities:** Aging infrastructure, including water systems, culverts, and above-ground power lines, was identified as a major risk. Municipalities expressed concern about system failures during extreme weather events and the cascading impacts on public safety.
- **Resource and Capacity Constraints:** Many communities noted limited funding and staffing as barriers to implementing resilience and preparedness initiatives. While plans often exist (e.g., CEMP, HMP), municipalities struggle to fully execute them due to financial and capacity limitations.
- **Emergency Communication Gaps:** While tools like CodeRED and reverse 911 systems are widely used, municipalities reported challenges with enrollment, message coordination, and reaching all residents, particularly those who are not digitally connected or who speak languages other than English.
- **Vulnerable Populations:** Communities identified challenges in supporting seniors, non-English speakers, and socially isolated individuals. While some municipalities maintain registries or partner with Councils on Aging, gaps remain in outreach and service delivery.
- **Evacuation and Transportation Challenges:** Geographic constraints (e.g., limited access routes in Rockport and Nahant) and reliance on personal vehicles present challenges during evacuations. Some municipalities have partnerships for buses or regional transit, but capacity may be limited.
- **Need for Regional Coordination:** Municipalities expressed strong interest in greater regional collaboration, including shared resources, coordinated planning, and clearer guidance on roles and responsibilities during emergencies.
- **Demand for Practical Tools and Funding Guidance:** A consistent priority across communities was the need for:
 - Clear “playbooks” or operational guides
 - Information on funding opportunities
 - Strategies to stretch limited municipal budgets
 - Real-world case studies from large-scale incidents

Resident Survey Results

Surveys conducted through Pathways for Children locations and the Salem Food Pantry gathered input from residents on emergency preparedness concerns, household readiness, communication preferences, evacuation plans, and specific needs.

Responses, collected in English and Spanish, highlighted key trends, including the types

of emergencies that worry residents most, gaps in household preparedness, preferred methods of receiving emergency information, and areas of community vulnerability. Open-ended feedback provided additional insights into local risks and recent experiences. The specific questions and responses are listed below.

Survey Questions and Responses

1. What types of emergencies concern you the most?

Respondents expressed the greatest concern about:

- Fires (32 responses)
- Natural disasters (29 responses)
- Power outages (27 responses)
- Medical emergencies (27 responses)

2. Do you or your household have an emergency plan or kit?

- Yes: 20
- No: 43
- Not sure: 9

3. How do you receive emergency information, and how would you prefer to receive it?

- Text alerts: 52
- Phone calls: 31
- Local news: 28
- Social media: 26
- Email notifications: 10
- Other: 1

4. If you had to evacuate, where would you go and how would you get there?

- Go to family/friends: 46
- Drive own vehicle: 40
- Emergency shelters: 18
- Hotel: 10
- Rely on family/friends for transportation: 6

5. Do you or anyone in your household have specific emergency needs (e.g., medical equipment, medications, pets, children, or dependents)?

- Yes: 31
- No: 29
- Not sure: 2

6. Survey Language

- English: 52
- Spanish: 20

7. Open-Ended Responses: Community Vulnerabilities & Recent Experience

Respondents identified several areas of concern, including:

- Flood-prone areas (e.g., near rivers, oceanfront, Salem, Lynn)
- Tree-heavy or wooded areas with risk of fallen trees
- Electrical infrastructure concerns (e.g., power lines, poles)
- Specific locations such as Ipswich River, Salem Wharf, and Riverdale Park
- Multi-family housing vulnerabilities
- Some respondents reported no concerns or were unsure

Key Takeaways

The findings from both the municipal focus groups and resident surveys highlight a range of shared challenges and priorities across North Shore communities. While each municipality faces unique risks, clear patterns emerged related to preparedness gaps, communication needs, and resource constraints. These insights directly informed the development of the conference, ensuring it addressed the most pressing needs identified by both local officials and residents. The key takeaways are as follows:

- **Preparedness Gaps at the Household Level:** A significant number of residents do not have an emergency plan or kit, indicating a need for increased public education and outreach.
- **Strong Preference for Direct Communication:** Residents overwhelmingly prefer text alerts and phone calls, reinforcing the importance of strengthening and expanding emergency notification systems.
- **Reliance on Informal Support Networks:** Most residents would rely on family or friends during an evacuation, suggesting potential gaps in awareness or trust of formal sheltering options.
- **High Prevalence of Additional Needs:** Nearly half of respondents reported having specific emergency needs (e.g., medical, mobility, dependents), highlighting the importance of inclusive and accessible planning.
- **Climate and Infrastructure Risks Are Top of Mind:** Both residents and municipalities identified flooding, storms, and infrastructure vulnerabilities as major concerns, showing strong alignment between community perception and municipal priorities.
- **Communication and Outreach Remain Critical Gaps:** From municipal

challenges with ENS enrolment to resident reliance on limited communication channels, improving outreach, especially to vulnerable populations, is essential.

- **Clear Demand for Actionable Guidance:** Municipalities are not looking for more high-level plans, they are seeking practical tools, funding strategies, and real-world examples they can implement immediately.

Conclusion

The findings from the municipal focus groups and resident surveys informed the development of the conference, shaping the agenda to address the most pressing needs identified by residents and municipal officials. Beyond guiding the conference, these insights provide a foundation for future planning, helping municipalities prioritize resources, improve communication strategies, and strengthen regional coordination to enhance emergency preparedness and community resilience.