

Planning Paves the Way to Community Resilience

New London County, Connecticut

Mystic, CT – The residents of coastal Connecticut recognize the value of investing in disaster resistance. Nor'easters and hurricanes bring destructive erosion, storm surge, downed utilities, and more. The communities know that “failing to plan is planning to fail.”

In recent years several public meetings have been held to plan, mitigate, and adapt to climate change issues that could mean even greater challenges in the years ahead. Participants included town residents, businesses, appointed and elected officials from local, State, and Federal governments, municipal staff, and others. They worked together to anticipate change, plan for their future, and seize every chance to take action to reduce their vulnerabilities.

One unplanned opportunity came in 2000 after a devastating fire in the Village of Mystic destroyed several waterfront businesses. Firefighters were confronted with a tangle of live wires that loomed above the buildings. These posed an extreme safety hazard and compromised the firefighting effort.

The fire offered the Town of Groton an opportunity to mitigate future damage. The Mystic Streetscape Project, conceived in the late 1990s as an upgrade to sidewalks and parking along West Main Street, was expanded through the acquisition of additional funding from the Federal Highway Administration's TEA-21-Transportation and Community Systems Preservation program to protect the electrical, telephone, and cable lines by burying them underground. By 2009, the planning that had been done on the overall project meant the community was also eligible for financial help through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to supplement the utilities retrofit portion received from FHWA. The disruption during construction was considerable and the expense enormous, but the project became a “once in a lifetime” effort to make the necessary improvements.

The Mystic Streetscape and Utility Relocation project, now nearly complete, has brought dramatic improvement to this historic and economically vital area. Pedestrian safety has been improved with innovative sidewalk and crosswalk design. Renovations also improved drainage. Keeping with the character of the village, old-style street lamps replaced poles, wires were placed underground, and power transformers that previously detracted from the scenery and could threaten lives during storms and fires were newly constructed at appropriate ground locations.

The underground utilities also proved to be reliable during Hurricane Sandy, which brought a foot of water into downtown businesses. Buildings served by the new system never suffered loss of power.