

Groton Conservation Advocates

...a nonprofit 501(c)(4) organization dedicated to the protection of Groton's natural resources

February 2024 Newsletter



Mystic flood photos by Megan Granato, December 18, 2023.



Mystic Flood Study Comments

By Liz Raisbeck

Groton's economic crown jewel, the downtown Mystic business and residential area, is increasingly threatened by flooding from sea level rise and more intense storm events.

Over the past year, the town of Groton has undertaken a study of the impacts—present and future—of rising sea levels and intense rain events on the downtown business district of Mystic. GCA encouraged our many friends to attend the January 4th public meeting on the study recommendations; we also submitted comments. Click [HERE](#) to read the full comment text.

Megan Granato, Groton's Manager for Sustainability and Resilience, led the study effort. Recommendations range from easy and inexpensive, such as putting up markers in flood prone areas showing height above sea level as a public education effort, to extremely expensive, including building a flood wall to protect Mystic harbor. Realistic but still costly measures include raising roads in key areas and installing backflow preventers on storm sewers so that water cannot back up onto the streets in low-lying areas. Another strategy for extreme rain events is to stop or slow water flowing down from High Street through the placement of catchments and rain gardens.

We have urged the Town staff and Council to appoint a strong administrator to move forward with an action plan for downtown Mystic that begins this year and to seek state and federal funding for projects right away. Additionally, downtown Mystic sits in a watershed with political boundaries in both Groton and Stonington. Groton needs to engage Stonington in creating a coordinated watershed approach to downtown, or money spent will fail to deliver the needed results.

Energy and Climate Change: Challenge and Opportunity

By Jessie Stratton

The energy/climate nexus is central to many of the challenges, and opportunities, facing CT. Actions we take today will not only have immediate benefits but will also determine our ability to achieve our longer-term goals of 100% non-carbon electricity by 2040 and a 50% reduction in all Green House Gas (GHG) emissions by 2050. CT, once considered a leader in promoting policies that would help achieve those goals, now lags behind MA and RI and numerous other states. Getting us back on course will require quantum leaps in energy efficiency and development of non-carbon energy generation.

Increasing CT's efficiency investments would save consumers money, improve public health and reduce GHGs. As of January 2024, federal tax credits cover 30% of the installed cost of dozens of energy-saving devices including heat pumps to efficiently heat and cool buildings. Click [HERE](#) for more information.

Dramatic increases in the amount of installed solar are essential as well. The 30% federal tax credit applies to solar and can often be paired with battery storage. CT has expanded incentives to meet a one-gigawatt (GW) energy-saving goal by 2030. Now residential customers can receive up to \$16,000 in upfront incentives instead of the previous maximum of \$7,500.

[ISO New England](#) estimates the region will need 35 GWs of electricity by 2040, and if it's to be non-carbon energy, offshore wind must provide about half the total. Difficulties in financing these large projects have led to some being abandoned, but CT, MA and RI are joining forces to rebid them to achieve economy of scale.

Revolution and Vineyard Wind are now proceeding. These projects will necessitate major new transmission lines to get power to where it is needed. Since New England [states have banded together](#) to work on an offshore regional solution, the federal government is offering financial support.

The electrification of cars and trucks is predicted to contribute to increased electric demand. GCA and many other environmental groups are urging the governor and legislature to adopt California's [Clean Cars and Clean Trucks rule](#) in the 2024 legislative session. Neighboring states have adopted the rule to phase out the sale of fossil fueled vehicles by 2035 and 2045. Since transportation accounts for 40% of the state's GHGs, moving to electric vehicles is an essential step to achieving our emission reduction goals.



A familiar view from Gold Star bridge! Wind turbine tower sections being put in place last October at New London's State Pier in preparation for Ørsted's South Fork Wind Farm project off the coast of Long Island, N.Y. The towers will rise 518 feet above the surface of the water when installed. Photo credit: Dana Jensen, The Day

GCA's Year-in-Review Newsletter is an annual publication dedicated to communicating GCA's mission to protect Groton's natural resources through public education and political action.

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Eastern Connecticut Rail and Transit Plan to Expand Shore Line East Service

By Zell Steever



In 2021 the state legislature funded a \$2.3 million feasibility study for expansion of Shore Line East (SLE) passenger rail service to Westerly from New London. Completed in December 2023 by the Department of Transportation (DOT), the study looked at adding new stations in Groton, Mystic, and Stonington, and upgrading the Westerly station. It also looked at rail expansion from New London to Norwich. The study shows real feasibility to expand SLE passenger rail service on the existing AMTRAK rails to Westerly. Hourly service would be the goal. There are more challenges in establishing a new rail line to Norwich, but expanded bus service is possible.

Recently officials in Westerly, RI have jumped on the bandwagon and are encouraging their state legislature to follow CT's lead. They see the extension as a great boon to the region, and an opportunity to run rail service to Green Airport and to connect towns in CT, RI, and MA via rail all the way to Boston.

SLE expansion would enable commuters to reach major employment centers like Electric Boat and Pfizer in Groton on public transportation, thus strengthening our economies. It would relieve the increasing congestion on I-95, which is gradually turning into a parking lot east of New Haven. Since transportation causes 40% of CT's greenhouse gas emissions, commuting by train and bus would considerably lessen the health and climate change impacts here. It also would strengthen tourism in the region by providing alternate transportation to crowded tourism centers like Mystic.

Our efforts to promote SLE expansion were handed a setback, however, when the 2023-24 state budget included a huge reduction to 40% below pre-COVID funding levels for SLE service from New Haven to New London. These cuts were supported by the governor, who opposes SLE expansion. The towns along the line are objecting to this slashing of rail service.

Groton's Representative Christine Conley and others are leading efforts to restore SLE funding to 100% of pre-COVID levels and put SLE expansion back in play during the short legislative session that began February 7. GCA will alert our supporters to turn out when the Transportation Committee holds hearings on restoration in the spring.

GCA Participates in Groton's First Earth Day Expo Event

By Kristen Earls

On Earth Day, April 22, 2023, the Groton Public Library hosted the town's first ever community-wide event, Earth Day Expo: Invest In Our Planet. Helmed by the owner of the Ditty Bag Market and local climate activist, Jason Hine, and a broad community coalition, the family-friendly event attracted close to 1,500 visitors—one of the Library's most trafficked days—and featured over 45 exhibitors, crafters and artisans, food vendors and farmers, guest speakers and legislators sharing resources and information on sustainable initiatives, green living and climate awareness. **Earth Day 2024 is April 22 and its theme is Planet vs Plastics.**



GCA hosted an engaging table of activities for all ages — with color-your-own postcards advocating for the protection of Long Island Sound by supporting house bills to make it illegal to harvest horseshoe crabs (a critical part of the ecosystem), and to ban Styrofoam™ single-use cups, containers, and school trays (a forever pollutant). In addition, GCA handed out bookmarks and newsletters, and solicited email sign-ups. All in all, 69 postcards were mailed to the state Environment Committee and GCA collected 30 new email sign-ups, increasing our pool of advocates.

Groton Approves Region's First Data Center Regulations

By Kristen Earls

With Groton's year-long Data Center Moratorium (prohibiting applications for data centers larger than 5,000 square feet) set to expire last June, the Planning & Zoning Commission (PZC) unanimously passed the area's first regulation of data centers on June 27, 2023. More than 20 members of the public spoke or wrote in support of the regulations, part of GCA's continuing community advocacy efforts opposing large scale data center development in Groton.

The Data Center Text Amendment, as the regulation is officially termed, limits the size of any proposed data centers to 12,500 square feet. In addition, a data center would only, and conditionally, be allowed in industrial zones in town. Currently, Pfizer houses Groton's largest data center at ~12,000 square feet; other data centers are smaller.

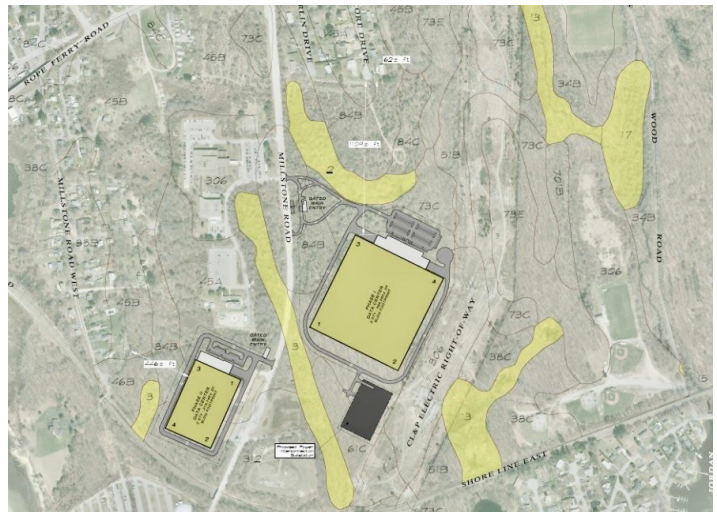
Significantly, any data center proposals must adhere to the state's [noise standards](#) and include a fire suppression plan. Any new data center is prohibited from locations within 1,500 feet of another data center property. To address a key environmental and air quality concern, regulations specify that data centers cannot be powered by fossil fuels, with the exception of a sudden power outage, and water evaporation methods are not allowed for cooling.

The regulations do, conditionally, allow accessory data centers, the type of small data centers a business might use for its operations in all zones, except for green zoned districts. Accessory data centers cannot be larger than 1,000 square feet or occupy greater than 20% of the primary usage on a given property.

Why it matters:

The PZC's amendment is the region's first to address the increase in the number of large scale data center proposals incentivized by the state's [2021 Act](#). Other towns, including Wallingford, Bozrah, and Griswold, have taken cues from

Groton's public opposition and subsequent zoning changes. They have either dissolved or put their municipal host agreements on hold. Waterford is the latest town to pen such an agreement, proposing to locate the center at Millstone Nuclear Plant in order to draw power directly from the site. Groton's data center regulations and earlier public efforts are being leveraged in that community opposition, and may have contributed to an early hurdle: [the state's siting council denied Dominion Energy's petition](#) to cede evaluation and approvals to the town.



NE Edge proposed data center at Millstone in Waterford

What's next:

In January 2024, the landowner of one of the proposed data center properties in Groton (at Hazelnut Hill and Flanders roads) sued the Town of Groton for more than \$2 million in damages, claiming that he had an agreement to sell the land to developer NE Edge to build a data center. On March 29, 2022, the Town Council voted not to sign the host agreement with NE Edge, and the PZC's new data center amendment limited the scale and features of what had been originally proposed. GCA will continue to monitor these and any other major future development projects in Groton.



SCRRRA Commercial Food Waste Composting

By Kris Kuhn

Southeast Connecticut Regional Resources Recovery Authority (SCRRRA), the waste and recycling manager for the 12-municipality re-

gion that includes Groton, recently announced breakthrough progress toward establishing eastern Connecticut's first commercial food scrap composting facility (<http://SCRRRA.org>). On January 25, 2024, the Town of Preston Planning and Zoning Commission unanimously approved SCRRRA's facility site plan, and the USDA awarded SCRRRA \$400,000, contributing substantially to an estimated \$2 million facility construction cost.

The facility will be located on a Route 12 property already owned by SCRRRA, and food drop-offs will be placed throughout the region. Initially, food waste will be sourced from restaurants and schools. Opportunities for residential participation, already initiated in Stonington, should follow.

A preliminary 10 week SCRRRA pilot study demonstrated the feasibility of producing high quality, commercially salable compost. The protocol combines wood chips and food waste, which provide necessary carbon and nitrogen nutrients, respectively, for the microbes to then digest. A schedule of mixing wood chips and food waste, combined with the sensor-calibrated addition of air and water, results in the production of a material that looks like dirt.

Local food waste composting "is a win-win," says Dave Aldridge, SCRRRA's Executive Director. Food waste, heavy and expensive to transport, makes up a whopping 25% of the solid waste stream. Processing food waste locally into compost that is salable for garden and agricultural use, at half the cost of disposal, makes both environmental and financial sense. Transfer station grinders already produce wood chips before disposal; incorporation into salable compost puts these wood chips to good use.

The next critical step is permitting by the Department of Energy and Environmental (DEEP). Historically, this has been a notoriously prolonged process. DEEP plays a leadership role in addressing Connecticut's waste management crisis; decisive action to expedite this permit would be a hugely positive accomplishment.

Aldridge hopes for expansion of food waste composting throughout Connecticut. "We very much want to be an easily duplicated prototype. Alignment of funding could line up six regional operations. This is local. You take what you generate locally and you process it locally."

Will Heat Kill Us First? We Won't Let it!

By Victor Villagra, MD

The July 2023 national bestseller, *The Heat Will Kill You First*, by Jeff Goodell is a stern warning and an urgent call to action. Because Groton and the State are already experiencing notable climate change (CC) phenomena, extreme heat has emerged as a top-priority public health hazard. Last summer, the Town's Resilience & Sustainability (R&S) manager conducted an **in-depth assessment** of the risk of extreme heat to Groton residents and its physical infrastructure. Here are a few study highlights:

Current trends point to a future range of temperatures beyond "being uncomfortable." National data indicate that CC is unfolding much faster than thought. Some people in our area will almost certainly get sick and some may even die unless preventive measures are implemented.

Who are most at risk? The elderly, low-income families, people with chronic conditions, children and renters. Lacking home air conditioning is a serious but remediable disadvantage if acted upon proactively.

What is the Town's responsibility for protecting everyone, particularly the most vulnerable?

- Public education is critical. The Town should develop and "stress-test" an effective mass communication capability. People without access to the internet or transportation (e.g., to public libraries) should be prioritized.

- Multi-channel information dissemination about home-cooling resources and personal protection (clothing, hydration, outdoor work breaks, etc.).

- Promote information about government incentives for citizens and organizations to avail themselves of renewable energy systems (solar, EVs, geothermal, wind, etc.) and conservation measures.

- Town-wide conservation and heat R&S investments: Trees and more trees, vegetation, cool pavements (streets, driveways, parking lots, etc.), cooling centers with free public transportation during emergencies.

- Emergency response capabilities for disabled, home-bound and medical device dependent individuals (dialysis, home ventilators, wheel-chair bound, etc.).

- Extreme heat waves can tax the electrical grid to the point of failure. The Town should invest in energy conservation and renewable energy in government buildings, schools and EV fleets to set an example. These investments will add some clean energy buffer capacity during extreme heat events.

Follow GCA on FACEBOOK!

Facebook is a great outreach tool for GCA. Our page is packed with interesting articles, vivid photos and videos accessible at the click of a mouse. We can share material and ideas coming in from all over the web and disperse our news and information back out there. As we keep up to date with current issues, the page is steadily gaining “likes,” “views,”



and followers. Sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words, and links you to more information and raises awareness about climate change, energy developments and other topics of interest to GCA. To find the page, go to Facebook.com and search for Groton Conservation Advocates. We encourage you to check it out, like, share, follow and join the conversation!

Suggestions for Environmental Reading

In August 2023 an article came out on a website titled ***Treehugger: Sustainability for All.***

The article contained a list of environmental books covering a broad range of topics from “climate disinformation to individual initiatives that have led to global change. Spanning different genres and perspectives on conservation issues, these 10 must-read environmental books are sure to spark the interest of the greenest book-worms.”

Here is the list of 10: Braiding Sweetgrass, Merchants of Doubt, The End of Nature, Silent Spring, The Sixth Extinction, The Uninhabitable Earth, Losing Earth, Eating Animals, An Inconvenient Truth, and No One Is Too Small To Make a Difference.



What’s Going On with the Oral School?



*The **Oral School** redevelopment project appears to be on indefinite hold because the state-owned property contains a brownfield in need of remediation. Connecticut law defines a brownfield as “any abandoned or underutilized site where redevelopment, reuse or expansion has not occurred due to the presence or potential presence of pollution in the buildings, soil or groundwater that requires investigation or remediation before or in conjunction with the redevelopment, reuse or expansion of the property.”*

You Can Help!

Get involved! Click [here](#) to add your name to our e-mail list.

We know you’re busy. Could you [make a donation](#)?

Write to us at groconadv2017@gmail.com with your ideas or concerns.