

Comments on the Downtown Mystic Flood Study

By Elizabeth Raisbeck, Co-chair, Groton Conservation Advocates

We commend the Town of Groton for taking a first step in trying to address the rising water in Mystic, Groton. Following are our comments on the project:

- The Town of Stonington needs to be enlisted to work on this issue with Groton immediately.
- The steps recommended in the study will only occur if there is very strong leadership coming from key elements of Groton. Saving Mystic is a big project, probably bigger than any Groton has ever undertaken. That should be acknowledged, and a planning group of leadership formed, which should include town staff, expert scientists who understand the science of coastal flooding, the Greater Mystic Chamber of Commerce, some local businesses in Mystic, and other local interest groups such as residents most affected by flooding. This group should work with stakeholders in Stonington and make recommendations to the Planning and Zoning Commission on the changes needed in our regulations to mitigate and reduce flooding in Mystic and other low-lying areas. The Town needs to designate a person with authority to drive the project forward. Leadership has to be strong and totally committed to the cause, especially when it involves spending town money. Failure to build on the momentum of this study immediately will likely lead to inertia and a waste of town funds.
- The next thing to address is clarification of what we are losing if we allow Mystic to gradually be inundated by rising sea level. This is critical to getting buy-in by the public, interest groups and town officials. We should know the tax values of the streets affected, and the value of the goods and services being sold in Mystic in vulnerable areas, so that we see clearly what is at stake if we DON'T start addressing the Mystic problem now. Mystic is a huge asset to Groton. In June 2023 Mystic was named the fourth best travel destination in the US by USA Today! We need to know the real value of Mystic and what the economic impact will be as properties become too expensive to maintain because of flooding and businesses will shrivel and die. Knowing that will keep us motivated.
- The study is vague on what should be done in 0-5 years and 5-10 years. The study should have provided a rough timetable of when the key recommendations need to be done by to create maximum protection for downtown Mystic; i.e. if we do X it needs to be in place by X year. With no timetable, human nature is likely to continue to push off the decision-making until it is too late and we are in deep water.
- It would have been helpful to have at least ballpark cost figures for the most realistic projects.
- The town has made considerable effort to engage the public on this project, which finally brought 113 people to the final presentation on January 4th. Increasing funds for public outreach will be essential to move things forward productively. Outreach is labor intensive and can't be done adequately by tacking it onto the jobs of already hardworking staff. Additional communications staff could assist the town with a number of important issues, especially moving forward to combat climate change.
- We wonder why this study doesn't address the water side of Main Street
- There are steps the town can take now to avoid mushrooming costs in downtown Mystic. First, require three feet of freeboard on any residential or commercial property that is not water dependent in the current 100-500 year floodplain if it is being substantially improved. Additionally, forbid all new building in the 500-year floodplain. We know that the official 500-year flood plain is rapidly becoming the 100-

or 50- or 25-year floodplain with global warming. These recommendations should be made to the Planning and Zoning Commission.

- There is no discussion of the critical role flood insurance plays in all of this.
- Require permeable surfaces for any new parking areas and permeable islands for existing lots.
- There was a missed opportunity in the study, which was to share the elevations of the various streets of Mystic, what blocks are most likely to flood, and how much in how many inches of rain. Also it should have recommended that the town put markers in all flood-prone areas of Groton, including Mystic, that show the elevation above sea-level, a cheap and easy way to educate the public about our low-lying areas. Ditto for evacuation routes.
- Groton has expert scientists in hydrology and climate change coastal resiliency living and working here. We encourage the town to utilize the expertise of these scientists in assessing the most cost-effective projects.
- Last but certainly not least, Groton should start discussions about moving the Mystic commercial district uphill over the long term. The sooner it is discussed, the sooner we will get used to the idea.

We strongly commend the town for conducting this study. The challenge will be to keep moving forward in a timely way to identify the measures that will have the strongest cost-benefit for the town, the merchants, and the citizens of Mystic/Groton.