



Food System Planning in Plymouth County Community Advisory Board Meeting, August 27, 2025

Meeting recap

The meeting focused on the second Community Advisory Board meeting as part of the Plymouth County Food System Planning project, which aims to strengthen the local food system and evaluate 101 indicators using the CARAT tool. The group discussed various policies and practices related to natural resource management, conservation, and ecosystem preservation, including vegetative buffer zones, enforcement challenges, and land use classification. The meeting covered topics such as animal feeding operations, renewable energy, fertilizer regulations, and water quality issues, with discussions centered on the impact of agricultural practices on local ecosystems and the need for policy interventions to address changing land use patterns.

Next steps

- Marion Institute: Follow up with members who have additional information about indicators for further questions
- Joanne: Compile a list of municipalities in Plymouth County with stricter wetland protection policies than the state requirements

Summary

Plymouth County Climate Resilience Meeting

Rita outlined the process of assessing 101 indicators using the CARAT tool, with the board acting as a work group to evaluate these indicators. The group reviewed progress from the previous July meeting, where 13 indicators were discussed, and planned to continue with theme one on natural resource management, conservation, and ecosystem preservation. Rita emphasized the importance of participation and respectful dialogue, encouraging all members to contribute their knowledge and insights.

Riparian Buffer Zone Policy Discussion

The group discussed policies and practices in Plymouth County related to vegetative buffer zones in riparian areas, focusing on the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act and the responsibilities of local conservation commissions. Howard explained that state-level acts provide for setbacks from rivers and other water bodies, while Hampton noted that local conservation commissions can sometimes waive these setbacks, although this is a controversial practice. The discussion highlighted ongoing challenges with development encroaching on protected areas, with Howard mentioning Halifax as an example of frequent requests to build near Monponsett Pond.

Conservation Policy Enforcement Challenges

The group discussed enforcement challenges of existing conservation policies, particularly around buffer zones and development restrictions. The discussion revealed that while state policies exist, enforcement varies between municipalities, with some implementing stricter local measures. Organizations like Mass Audubon, Save the Bay, and the Community Land and Water Coalition were mentioned as resources for conservation efforts, while funding for protection efforts comes from programs like SNAP and NBEP.

Pond and River Fencing Policies

The group discussed policies and programs related to pond and river fencing to prevent livestock damage, with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) identified as the main federal program involved. They explored the role of health departments and boards, noting that while some regional involvement exists, there are few active dairy farms in Plymouth County. The discussion also covered agroforestry practices, revealing limited attention and implementation in the area, despite some interest from towns like Duxbury and existing programs through NRCS and MDAR's climate-smart agriculture initiative. Concerns were raised about the impact of cranberry farming on rare pine forests, with Hampton noting that struggling cranberry farmers often convert their land to residential development.

Massachusetts Agricultural Land Protection

The group discussed land use classification and protection in Massachusetts, particularly focusing on Chapter 61A and B lands, which include agricultural and forestry areas. Hampton suggested using MassGIS to map these lands across the state, while Howard noted that assessors maintain lists of Chapter 61 lands and recommended contacting retired forestry planners for historical data. The discussion highlighted that while Chapter 61 provides tax benefits and protection, landowners can still remove their properties from the program after a 6-7 year rollback period, making conservation efforts crucial to prevent the conversion of agricultural lands.

Plymouth County Agricultural and Energy Policies

The group discussed policies and practices related to animal feeding operations, commercial fishing, and renewable energy in Plymouth County. They clarified that concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) are not common in Massachusetts, with Joanne noting their absence in Plymouth County as far as OCPC knew. The discussion touched on regulations for commercial fishing and lobstering, with John mentioning personal and commercial harvesting limits. Karen highlighted MDAR grants focused on agricultural energy efficiency, while the group noted a lack of specific organizations in Plymouth County promoting renewable energy for food transport.

Cranberry Bogs to Solar Farms

The group discussed the challenges and opportunities related to the conversion of cranberry bogs to solar energy installations in Massachusetts. Howard expressed concerns about the potential collapse of the cranberry industry and the subsequent conversion of agricultural land

to solar farms, noting that many cranberry bogs have already become non-productive. Rita highlighted the need for policy interventions to address the changing landscape of farmland ownership and the disconnect between food production and increased climate variability. The discussion touched on the state's stance on using agricultural land for renewable energy and the potential for repurposing old and new cranberry bogs for alternative agricultural uses or solar farms.

Massachusetts Fertilizer Regulation Overview

The group discussed fertilizer regulations in Massachusetts, with Karen noting that there are no strict regulations on fertilizer use in the state, though the NRCS may require nutrient management plans for lands under conservation restrictions. Bill explained that MDAR has an optional fertilizer registration program requiring reporting of amounts and products used, while Howard mentioned best practices in the cranberry industry and shared a story about water contamination in Plympton due to improper disposal of cranberry waste. Hampton added that organic certification has its own restrictions, allowing certain treatments like algaecides in ponds but not directly on plants, with a transition period of 3-5 years for converting land to organic status.

Eutrophication and Agricultural Runoff Discussion

The group discussed eutrophication issues in local rivers and ponds, particularly related to agricultural runoff and fertilizer residues. Hampton explained that cyanobacteria blooms are more frequent in areas near bogs, though these tend to diminish over time as bogs age. The discussion revealed that while there are some water quality monitoring programs in the area, such as the Taunton River Watershed Alliance and monitoring of Duxbury Bay, there is no specific tracking of the connection between eutrophication and farming practices. Bill Napolitano mentioned that MDAR has plant nutrient regulations for both agricultural and non-agricultural land, which were promulgated in 2015 and amended in 2018, though these are not laws but rather guidelines.

Water Quality and Agricultural Impacts

The group discussed the impact of fertilizers, pesticides, and septic systems on water quality, particularly in relation to cyanobacteria blooms in local ponds. They explored educational initiatives related to fertilizer use and observed the growing presence of pest control companies in the area. The conversation touched on the challenges of testing for pesticide residues and the emerging concern of PFAS contamination.

The conversation concluded with plans to continue discussing community health and well-being in the next theme, and Howard emphasized the need to engage with a large-scale cranberry bog owner for further insights.

Attendees

Alyssa Papatanakis, OCPC

Andrea Dickinson, Sustainable Plymouth / Plymouth Open Space Committee

Bill Napolitano, OCPC

Cassandra Thayer, Town of Cohasset
Hampton Watkins, Resident
Howard Randall, Resident
Joanne Zygmunt, OCPC
John Fay, City of Brockton
Karen Peterson, BID Plymouth
Karen Pettinelli, SRPEDD
Laurie Hepworth, Edible SEMA
Liz Wiley, Marion Institute
Molly Vollmer, Plymouth County Extension
Rachel Weil, Metropolitan Area Planning Council
Richard Warren, River Street Gardens
Rita Higgins, Marion Institute
Rob May, City of Brockton

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