

PART ONE

Centering Racial Equity in Authentic Community Engagement



Chris McIntosh

Purpose

The Resilient Mystic Collaborative (RMC) co-facilitators share some experiences with centering equity in climate resilience practices, so that other watershed scale collaboratives diving into this important work might relate to and learn from their story.

Background

The **Resilient Mystic Collaborative** is a partnership among 20 cities and towns supported by community based organizations (CBOs) in Greater Boston's Mystic River Watershed. Together, they work to protect people and places from climate-intensified risks and vulnerabilities that cannot be managed within individual municipal boundaries.

Why center equity in climate resilience?

Inequitable outcomes result from past and current public policy (such

as extreme heat in neighborhoods where the government denied mortgage insurance, and therefore homeownership, to people of color). As RMC co-facilitator Julie Wormser put it, "If our policies put some people disproportionately in harm's way, we should focus on closing that gap." There are also practical benefits to centering equity in climate resilience. By listening to and understanding each other, we are better able to rebuild our communities. Marginalized groups' lived experience and expertise is essential for imagining and implementing solutions that work for a broad range of people, and for

avoiding solutions that reinforce existing power inequities.

At a regional level, RMC members start with the best available data to project which places and people will be in harm's way over time. For example, all 20 communities put their stormwater system into a rainfall model that downscaled Global Climate Model data for the watershed. RMC members now have 2070 projections to identify future flood prone areas. The next step is to prevent flood damage in those places. This is a targeted strategy to get vulnerable people and critical resources such as schools, subsidized housing, and health centers out of harm's way.



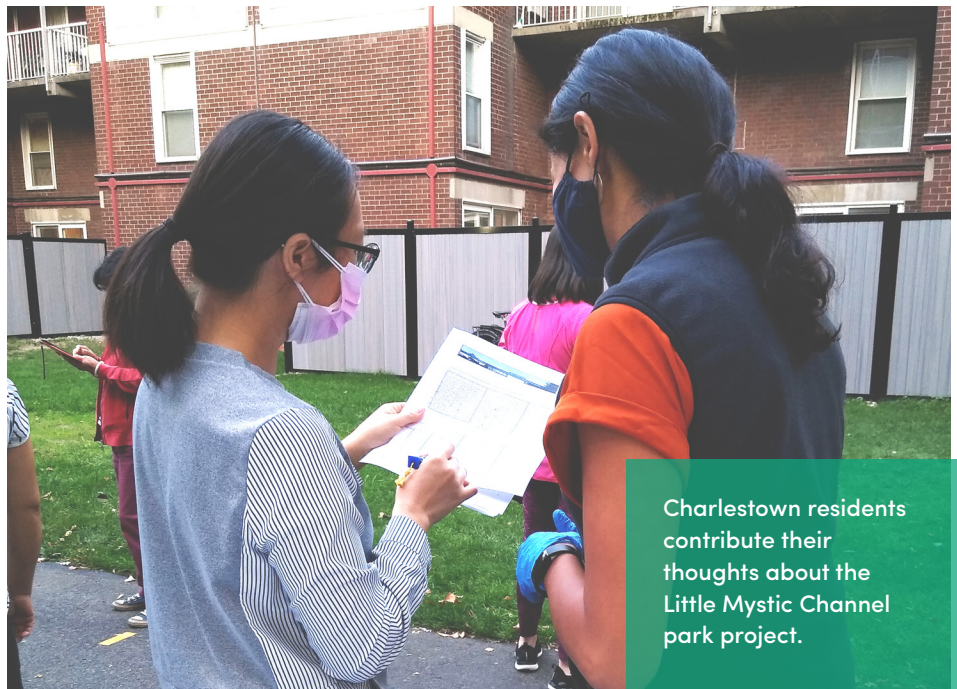
Mystic River Watershed Association (MyRWA)

The Resilient Mystic Collaborative celebrates their 1 year anniversary.

Collaborative engagement at the watershed scale

In 2020/2021, RMC members secured State Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) funding to perform an equity-centered **Lower Mystic Climate Vulnerability Assessment**. The project looked at how critical infrastructure would fail during an extreme storm, and how that failure would affect very low income residents and workers. The project budget was equally divided between social and infrastructure vulnerability. RMC members subcontracted with CBOs (**see our resource on partnering with CBOs on community engagement**) to conduct 45-minute surveys with low income, predominantly BIPOC community members about their lived experience. Participants were compensated for their input, but due to COVID and other challenges, the project was limited in terms of community-building engagement. Because of this, the CBO partners indicated that, even though the participants were paid, the process did not benefit them otherwise, making it more extractive than collaborative. This was important feedback for RMC members.

Truly collaborative engagement involves asking community members what they want first and integrating their voices throughout the project, from concept to completion. As Julie says, it shifts the experience from, “why did that person from somewhere else pay me to answer these questions?” to “I understand why I’m doing this and over time, I believe it will help my neighborhood.” RMC members recently completed watershed-wide research on urban heat islands called **Wicked Hot Mystic**. Several of the hotter communities are now working with neighborhood groups to co-design outdoor cooling solutions, such as tree planting, to help people stay safe in ways they find most useful and enticing. This model is closer to truly collaborative engagement.



Charlestown residents contribute their thoughts about the Little Mystic Channel park project.

Lessons learned on equity and engagement

RMC members work to address racial and income inequality in visions and values, research and assessments, distribution of resources, and processes. Some of their early lessons on equity and community engagement include the following:

- **Ensure representation**
RMC members consider the perspectives that need to be in the conversation. They address barriers to participation (e.g. childcare, transportation) and go to where people are (e.g. local churches). Community conversations happen in spaces where people feel comfortable and with language and technology that people understand. If necessary, RMC members do targeted, compensated outreach to people who can reasonably represent the perspectives they seek.
- **Engage youth in research**
To learn about the lived experience of priority populations, RMC members engage in participatory research, studying an issue by collaborating with those affected by it. For example, they might pay teenagers to use thermometers or apps such as “ISeeChange” to record temperatures and photos in their neighborhoods during heat waves. This has additional benefits of engaging young people in science and as advocates for their community.
- **Compensate community members**
Some RMC projects have locally representative steering committees where members are paid to attend meetings and share their perspectives and expertise. Survey respondents are compensated at \$50 an hour via Visa cards that work like cash but do not require having a bank account or a social security number. RMC members subcontract with place-based CBOs for community engagement at similar rates as other contractors.
- **Hold conversations first**
RMC members have found that it’s better to hold focus groups or interviews first, and then design other engagement instruments based on what you learn. Conversations allow you to explore community needs in depth and tease out nuances that are difficult to capture in multiple-choice surveys.

- **Take anonymity needs very seriously**

People need to trust that their feedback is anonymous, especially when there's a power differential. For example, RMC members consider whether folks are undocumented, reliant on an employer for a job, or dealing with trauma while having interracial conversations. If folks can talk to people they are comfortable with and trust, they can have a better experience and you can obtain better information.

- **Be intentional and thoughtful**

RMC members have learned that when you try to do this work quickly, it ends up feeling transactional. They spend a lot of time and thought on process. For example, they recently proposed a two-year project to envision a waterfront, and the first year would be spent primarily on trust building. The key output of that process would be principles to guide waterfront development that is climate resilient and equitable.

- **Design process to manage power**

The process should level the playing field in terms of power and ensure that all the stakeholders who have interest are valued. For example, meetings should not be monopolized by those with the loudest voices. People who need time to process should be provided space to do so. RMC members see building a group's collective capacity to establish consensus as an important part of the process. Expectations

should be set for who will make decisions and how. The more that community members are leading versus following, the better.

- **Facilitate to manage power**

After you design the process to manage power, it takes attentiveness to manage it while facilitating. RMC members recommend hiring a professional or working with a skilled facilitator who can actively increase or limit people's power with appropriate interventions during meetings (e.g. "Would anyone who hasn't shared yet like to speak?"). Facilitators also have methods for managing conflict effectively.

- **Inspire goodwill**

Early on, RMC co-director Carri Hulet asked a group, "If we are wildly successful, what do you hope happens for your community, and what do you hope happens for other communities?" That mindset of generosity can inspire collaboration and the feeling that we are all in this together. RMC members try to demonstrate trustworthiness by following through on commitments.

- **Set equity-centered visions**

Structural racism has caused certain groups of people to be more vulnerable to extreme heat than others. Setting a vision such as: "there is no correlation between air temperature, income, and race" helps focus resources on closing the gaps on extreme heat by concentrating cooling solutions in urban heat islands.

Additional Resources

- *Connecting for Equitable Climate Adaptation: Mapping Stakeholder Relationships in Metro Boston* from UMass Boston Sustainable Solutions Lab
- *Recommendations for Equitable Climate Resilience in East Boston* from UMass Boston Sustainable Solutions Lab
- *Centering Equity in Climate Change Resilience Planning: A Guide for Connecticut Municipalities* from the Yale Center for Environmental Justice
- *Centering Racial Justice in Urban Flood Adaptation: Planning and Evaluation Tools for Great Lakes Cities* from the University of Michigan
- *The North Shore Office of Resilience and Sustainability equity evaluation tool*
- *Equity Frameworks in Watershed Based Collaboratives* from Kayla Patel

This product is the part of a broader toolkit to inspire and inform watershed-scale climate collaborations. **Learn more here.**

This resource was developed in collaboration by the Resilient Mystic Collaborative and Mass ECAN Slow the Flow Work Group, written by S. Callahan with input from J. Wormser, C. Hulet, M. Ocana, Z. Murphy, K. Patel, P. Mande, D. Mattes.

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