

Stakeholder Activity Description: The following is an interactive role-playing activity to be used in conjunction with CREW’s Neighborhood Resilience Powerpoint.

The Town:

Bellweather is a mid-sized town in western New Hampshire with a population of 20,000 people. It is the historic site of a paper mill, which served as the economic backbone of town until it shut down in the 1980s. The main industries in Bellweather are now tourism and the local hospital, as well as dairy farming and maple sugaring in the surrounding rural areas. Bellweather also has a growing community of local artists. In recent years, in an innovative town collaboration, many of the former mill buildings have been repurposed as artist lofts, restaurants, and tourist shops; others have been converted into affordable housing for low-income and elderly residents.

Like many New England towns, the health and livelihoods of Bellweather residents are at risk of multiple climate change impacts, including elevated temperatures, shorter winters, expansion of Lyme disease, and dulling of fall foliage. The most pressing issue, however, is that the river that runs through town often floods during heavy rain events. The former mill complex is particularly vulnerable to flooding, as it is located adjacent to the river. Just six years ago, Hurricane Irene, a ‘100-year’ storm, flooded the first floor of the mill complex. The event was costly and dangerous; some of the mill building basements flooded and a chunk of nearby road was damaged. Even so, things could have been much worse. In a bigger storm, some buildings might lose power and some ground floor structures could even be vulnerable to collapse. Moreover, evacuating the complex’s combination of elderly residents, art installations, and businesses would be difficult and expensive. Many in town are concerned because ‘100-year’ storm events are projected become more frequent and severe over the coming decades, perhaps occurring every 3 to 10 years. Some in town have even recommended abandoning the complex entirely.

Today, the mayor has convened you, a group of local leaders, to develop a strategy for preparing the mill complex for extreme weather events. In small groups, she has asked you to consider the following options for action, ranked according to relative expense:

Low expense:

- Practice emergency response protocols; expand shelter capacity in other parts of town
- Develop green infrastructure around the mill complex

Medium expense:

- Install a solar micro-grid at the former mill to avoid power outages
- Renovate mill buildings to reduce flood risk and ensure structural integrity

High expense:

- Fortify river edge with small-scale concrete levee
- Move the mill buildings or facilitate relocation of vulnerable residents

The mayor has asked you to discuss the following questions and develop recommendations:

- What are the greatest risks to the mill complex? What are the greatest priorities?
- What action(s) should Bellweather take, short- and long-term, to mitigate these risks?

Small business owner – You are the owner of a local outing supply store, and are hoping to expand into a recently renovated section of the mill complex to capitalize on the buzz that surrounds the neighborhood. You are worried that any efforts to reinforce the building would increase the rent, and would also delay your ability to open your store and turn away tourists. It's not that you aren't concerned about the building's residents – but if the commercial wing of the building is not successful, you know that the whole venture will fail, as the tenant rent alone is not enough to support building maintenance. You think the best solution is to focus on developing evacuation plans for elderly residents. Any renovation money should be spent helping make the businesses at the complex more attractive to tourists.

President of nurse's association – Your primary worry is for the health of the residents who live in the mill complex - especially the elderly residents, many of whom have additional health, cognitive, and mobility problems that put them at increased risk during flooding events. It was a long fight to preserve some of the high-value mill property as affordable, elderly-friendly housing, and you want to keep the residents where they are if at all possible – as long as they are safe. You think ensuring this safety should be a town budget priority, and could also be funded by increasing fees associated with the businesses that rent space in the mill. To this end, you would support constructing flood protection in the building and additional barriers for the surrounding shoreline, as well as building a solar micro-grid on the roof of the building to ensure residents, some of whom are on dialysis or are vision-impaired, are not endangered by power loss.

Watershed association board member – You have lived in Bellweather for a long time, and seen the way that the local river ecology – and the health of the town – were harmed by the mill's oppressive work schedule, as well as the contaminants released by its production processes. You are glad to see what the mill complex has become, and you are very hesitant to continue to spend time and money fortifying the complex with concrete – you'd rather see that money going to connecting people more deeply with the watershed, and developing long-term flood management approaches that help both human and watershed health. You think that by far the most sustainable approach would be to focus on green infrastructure – to remove much of the concrete at the mill site and the river shoreline, and replace this with native grasses, trees, and shrubs.

Fire Chief – You are concerned for the safety of all inhabitants of the mill complex - and, in particular, the wellbeing of elderly and low-income residents. Though the mill is pretty and you’ve enjoyed a beer or two at one of the restaurants, you’ve had a chance to inspect the building and are not happy with what you’ve seen. The structure of the building is not sound; even in low-level flooding you’d be concerned about the floorboard and stairwell integrity. What’s more, the heating and electrical systems are not impervious to water, and flooding could even pose the risk for an electrical fire. You are, honestly, a little sick of people insisting that it’s worthwhile to stay in the building – if they could see what you see, you’re sure they would change their minds. The only option is to relocate – to prioritize funding to assist vulnerable residents in obtaining new accessible and affordable housing. The town could allow artists and business owners to compete for a limited number of vacant storefronts downtown.

Head of Local Artist Cooperative – You have only lived in Bellweather for five years, but in that time have come to love its rustic charm and small-town community. The mill building is a town treasure – not only a place to come together, but also a creative inspiration for the way it unites past struggle with present innovation. What’s more, you’ve been talking with some architect friends recently, and they think the building is fairly unique for how well the 18th-century wooden beam construction has been preserved. You have a dream of turning the upper floors of one of the mill buildings (which are currently apartments) into a history museum that would not only preserve local memory of the paper mill, but also highlight a period architecture that has been unblemished by commercial development. The museum could also feature local art – a bunch of other artists are already on board. This kind of project would bring revenue into the town, and would definitely warrant spending money both on green infrastructure and on additional fortifications for the building and riverbank. You’re concerned about the elderly population too, of course – but the best thing for everyone might be for the mill to become exclusively a commercial space, and for residents to be encouraged to move elsewhere.