



## All Things Sustainable

**Q: What are the most important steps we can take to create a more sustainable and resilient future for Lexington?**

A: Our first response is often to focus on hard infrastructure issues – like designing resilient buildings, electric grids and communications systems. But it turns out that communities with good social cohesion – where neighbors know each other and trust each other – may make a huge difference in your odds of surviving extreme weather events.

In the summer of 1995, a blistering heat wave unexpectedly killed 739 people in Chicago. What shocked many people was the fact that adjacent neighborhoods with similar demographics and infrastructure had vastly different death rates during this crisis.

The power grid failed, roads buckled, drawbridges locked, ambulance response time suffered equally across the city. Why would one neighborhood have the highest fatality rate and an adjacent neighborhood have one of the lowest fatality rates?

The best explanation turns out to be good social infrastructure – places that encourage an active community life, public spaces that allow neighbors to mingle, stores and restaurants, where neighbors can talk and get to know each other. In these neighborhoods older people belonged to neighborhood groups and residents knew who they had to look after during a heat wave.

In nearby neighborhoods without stores and restaurants or local parks, with broken and uneven sidewalks that discouraged people from going outside – neighbors didn't know or trust each other. As a result, they tended to hunker down in their homes and bake during the heat wave.

We saw the same thing after Hurricane Sandy. Residents of neighborhoods with low levels of social cohesion – as measured by how much residents trusted their neighbors – reported much longer recovery times.

What we've learned is that increased community interaction decreases feelings of isolation – people who are engaged in social and civic events with their neighbors enjoyed increased resilience against extreme weather events.

It turns out that neighborhoods where people feel isolated from each other on a good day – can become lethal on a really bad day.

**Q: Ok, so what can I do to make a difference?**

A: Well for a start, get out and go for a walk in your neighborhood – smile, say hello, stop and get to know your neighbors, make them your friends, invite them over to your place. You can bike or walk into Lexington Center to meet friends for a meal. You can join a neighborhood group, throw a block party, or attend a concert.

Volunteer for a cause or an organization you support. I know you are busy – but we all spend way too much time in front of our screens these days. Real change doesn't happen by clicking "Like" on Facebook. You'll be glad you did.

Make a plan with your neighbors – identify who may need your help in the event of an extreme storm. Check in with them during and after an extreme weather event to offer your help.

**Q: Neighbors can only do so much. What should our community leaders be doing to respond to extreme climate events?**

A: One excellent first step would be to design all of our buildings and municipal systems to be able to provide essential services such as Police, Fire, Public Safety and the ability to provide shelter to Town residents for up to 5 days in the event of power outages, flooding, and extreme temperatures.

In the last decade we've seen many communities in Massachusetts and New England suffer from ice storms, tornadoes, floods, and hurricanes that caused them to lose power for one to three weeks. It is only a matter of time before we experience a similar disruption.

Our schools, community centers, police and fire facilities should be designed to maximize their resilience, and to generate the electrical and thermal power needed to continue operating and provide shelter for our residents in the event of extreme storms.

**Q: Anything else?**

A: Yes, be thankful everyday – that we live in a community filled with wonderful friends and neighbors – and let your neighbors know how much you appreciate them.

*Send your sustainability questions to [questions@sustainablelexington.org](mailto:questions@sustainablelexington.org). We look forward to hearing from you.*