

MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

Communicating About and Engaging People in
Community-Led Climate Relocation



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Communities across the United States are facing increasingly difficult decisions as climate impacts become more frequent and extreme. Communities are often left to navigate complex and emotionally intense trade-offs with limited guidance. In response to these challenges, the Geos Institute engaged Climate Access to consider current evidence and best practices for engaging the public in climate preparation conversations, particularly when there is the need to discuss the potential for relocation of some assets or entire communities.

Developed with support from the Climate Ready America program funded by the Walmart Foundation, this framework is designed to help the Southeast Navigator Network in facilitating community-led decision-making. While this work focuses on the Southeastern United States, it offers insights that are applicable to other regions and represents an emerging area of practice as climate impacts and inequalities grow.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When relocation initially entered the adaptation conversation, it was primarily considered as an infrastructure problem focused on moving people away from physical risk through top-down planning processes or buyout programs. Relocation is beginning to be understood as a complex social, emotional, political, cultural and governance challenge that must be approached through long-term relationship building and shared decision-making. Communities must have the power to shape decisions about whether, when and how relocation occurs. Historically marginalized communities often face the greatest climate risks while having the least influence over planning decisions. Relocation efforts can end up exacerbating existing inequities if transparency and inclusivity aren't prioritized from the beginning.

Traditional engagement models often assume communities just need more information. Best practices show that what's actually needed is engagement that's grounded in listening and dialogue, which takes place as an ongoing process that evolves over time and responds to a community's shifting needs as they move through different stages of grappling with impacts and the implications of potential relocation. Discussions about relocation are emotionally charged and engagement approaches must support people in processing these responses, rather than trying to minimize or bypass them in service of moving more quickly toward actions. Beginning conversations early, before infrastructure systems fail completely, allows relocation to be part of a broader continuum of adaptation pathways rather than a singular response to an immediate crisis. Effective engagement takes patience. Difficult conversations are more productive when people have time to reflect and continue the discussion over time.

INTRODUCTION

Communities across the Southeast are increasingly on the frontlines of climate impacts. Many are already facing sea-level rise, riverine flooding, groundwater inundation, more frequent and severe storms and dangerous heat waves, which are stressing infrastructure, ecosystems and people. These impacts are expected to get worse, creating significant challenges for governments and community members.

The conversations that happen before, during and after a relocation decision are not linear. Communities may move forward, pause, revisit assumptions or shift direction as new information, leadership, funding or impacts occur. **The *Moving Forward Together* guide emphasizes flexibility, trust-building and iterative engagement rather than a prescriptive approach.** Effective engagement requires supporting communities at their own pace.

The purpose of the *Moving Forward Together* guide is to help government and community leaders develop participatory, equitable climate decision making processes that are rooted in trust around tough issues. This includes when adaptation solutions are lacking and/or out of reach financially and relocation may need to be considered. It is intended to provide strategies for when communities are ready to move forward in having these tough conversations, while acknowledging that decision-making will continue to be shaped over time by a community's lived experience and ongoing dialogue. It outlines the barriers communities face, best practices for engagement and a phased roadmap for Climate Ready America Navigators. Navigators are climate resilience experts who work directly with communities, especially those with the fewest resources. They listen to local leaders and help them identify the next steps towards cutting climate pollution, adapting to climate impacts and building long-term resilience.

THERE IS NO SINGLE ANSWER

There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Every community is dealing with different risks and priorities. Responses need to reflect what matters to each specific community.

TIMELINES MATTER

Communities are experiencing impacts now, such as pervasive flooding from storms and inundation. At the same time, climate scenarios illustrate that some impacts will intensify, such as sea level rise adding to and increasing current flooding in the future. Communities need to deal with current risks while also planning for what's coming next.



TRADE-OFFS EXIST ALREADY AND WILL BECOME HARDER OVER TIME,

particularly if the work to cut the emissions driving climate change is not as aggressive as needed. As climate impacts worsen, for some communities there will be tough decisions to make. Some solutions that may work in the short term, such as expanding green space to improve flood mitigation, may not be effective in the longer term when flood factors - storms, inundation and sea level rise - combine and take risks to a new level.

ADAPTIVE SOLUTIONS MAY BE VERY LIMITED,

especially when looking at future impact scenarios. Communities may have to question whether they are going to attempt to protect in place or if relocating some assets, some sections or all of their community might be necessary. Community members need to be involved in deciding what options to explore and what actions to take. Governments have important roles to play, such as providing data and technical expertise, convening stakeholders and creating policies. At the same time, it is important that community members share how climate impacts are affecting their lives, what their concerns are for the future and what solutions should be prioritized. That local, cultural and Indigenous knowledge merges with data about climate impacts to inform what the right choices will be for communities. Relocation is a deeply emotional undertaking that can affect the social fabric, history and culture of entire communities.

CLIMATE ADAPTATION INCLUDING RELOCATION DECISIONS MUST BE LED BY COMMUNITIES

and grounded in their right to say what options work and whether they want to stay or leave in order to be fair and just. Climate change sparks many emotional reactions including grief and a sense of uncertainty. The concept of relocation can be particularly triggering, given people's connection to and history with places. When it comes to responding to and planning for the impacts of climate change, communities may also be wary of outside actors due to histories of injustice or exploitation and may be reluctant to engage in planning processes that feel top-down or prescriptive.

METHODOLOGY

To inform the guidance, Climate Access reviewed 20 sources, including peer-reviewed academic articles, as well as practitioner resources (see Appendix for the full list). The literature review emphasized approaches that are trauma-informed, equity-centered and participatory and included resources applied in resilience programs and local engagement processes such as participatory mapping, citizen assemblies and storytelling. At each stage of the framework development, Climate Access consulted with [Geos Institute](#) and the [North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality](#) and the [Climigration Network](#) for input and feedback on the process and recommendations.

THE CHALLENGE

Responding to climate change often means making tough trade-offs, with relocation as one of the most profound examples. Decisions about whether, when or how to relocate are shaped by a range of factors that extend beyond logistics and technical planning including:

EMOTIONAL WEIGHT

Relocation conversations can bring up grief, trauma and fear. People are being asked to consider leaving behind not just their houses, but their neighborhoods, schools and family history. These losses can feel immense. Without trauma-informed approaches, residents may withdraw from discussions or feel silenced.

INEFFECTIVE TERMINOLOGY

Words matter. Terms like “managed retreat” are not commonly understood and can evoke disempowerment, suggesting top-down authority forcing communities to leave. Such terminology focuses on loss rather than agency. Communities are more likely to engage when language emphasizes shared decision-making and protection of what matters most.

COMMUNICATION GAPS

Information about climate risks is often presented in highly technical terms. Jargon is alienating and facts alone rarely motivate action. Communities need to hear about risks in ways that connect with lived experience and values from messengers they trust.

STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES

Displacement can erode social cohesion and erase generations of history. Structural inequities mean that some voices (especially those of Black, Indigenous, immigrant, low-income and renter communities) are often excluded from decision-making. Relocation planning that does not address inequity risks reinforcing these injustices.

MISTRUST OF INSTITUTIONS

Many communities hold mistrust toward government agencies and universities, rooted in histories of inequitable and extractive decision-making. Prescriptive approaches that fail to address this legacy can repeat that harmful cycle.

NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY

Projections about timing and severity of risks can shift and communities are often asked to make decisions with incomplete or conflicting information. This uncertainty can create decision paralysis and confusion, making the role of trusted facilitators even more critical.

LACK OF PROCESS AND FUNDING

Lack of funding and bureaucratic red tape can make it difficult to build trust and implement solutions. When governments ask community members to be involved in processes and then are unable to deliver on implementation and funding, it adds to the emotional weight of the situation, deepens mistrust and reinforces fatalism about public engagement.



BEST PRACTICES

Climate decisions need to reflect local realities in order to work. At the same time, through the research and resources review, a set of four key best practices emerged that are applicable across communities.

- **Participatory planning** that is community-driven ensures individuals are co-leaders in shaping decisions.
- **Beginning with local priorities** recognizes that people enter the process with their own expertise and concerns.
- **Early and continuous engagement** builds trust over time by involving community members from the outset.
- **Integration of equity and justice** ensures that engagement addresses historical and current inequities and centers those most impacted and aims to avoid reinforcing harm.

PARTICIPATORY PLANNING THAT IS COMMUNITY-DRIVEN

Community members should be co-leaders in shaping their futures, rather than passive recipients of information or directives. This requires taking time to identify stakeholders most affected by climate impacts at the outset of any planning or policy process, what they care about and how best to engage them and shaping outreach strategies to reflect their values and concerns.

Participatory planning demands an investment in processes that allow people to co-design how decisions will be made; facilitate dialogues regarding risks, solutions and trade-offs; and play a role in decision-making and implementation.

Local and regional governments don't have to go it alone. People are most willing to engage with those they know and trust. Providing training, funding and coaching to community leaders and members to reach and activate those in their social networks to participate in community-led climate relocation decision-making is one of the most impactful, authentic and efficient strategies.

BEGIN WITH LOCAL PRIORITIES

Individuals come into these conversations with different levels of knowledge and readiness. Meeting people where they are means beginning with the issues that feel most pressing to them, whether it's expressly climate-related like flooding or other issues that are top of mind such as jobs and the economy. It also needs to reflect their stage of change with the issue and consider whether they are new to the issue, skeptical of the science or mistrustful of leadership.

Each community's phase of readiness is different, so timelines must be flexible. A tailored pace and sequencing of relocation allows communities to control the pace of change and prepare to adjust to new transitions. By co-creating the solutions to adopt and co-determining the pace at which to adopt them, residents can be confident that the changes are not externally imposed or feel that they are being excluded from key decisions.

When relocation of a community is needed, working in partnership with residents to identify important spaces and connections before exploring potential sites, potential locations are more likely to align with community needs. Close proximity of destination sites to original homes helps preserve cultural and economic ties. When relocation sites are nearby, residents can maintain access to jobs, schools, and social networks.



EARLY AND CONTINUOUS ENGAGEMENT

Involving the public as partners in planning requires early and continued engagement throughout assessment, decision-making and implementation processes. It means giving community input equal weight to expert knowledge, such as climate impact projections and vulnerability assessments. It's important to let communities set the pace of decision-making and adjust the timeline and strategies based on participant input.

Many communities, particularly those that have been historically or are currently marginalized, have deep mistrust of institutions. In order to build and/or restore trust, transparency, empathy and relationship-building are essential. Time is also needed to allow people to process what is at stake and experience and move through the grief tied to current or potential loss.

INTEGRATION OF EQUITY AND JUSTICE

Climate adaptation strategies should seek to protect cultural identity, social cohesion and economic ties. They must recognize that communities have different needs, vulnerabilities and sources of power. Authentic engagement must recognize and address these differences to avoid reinforcing inequity. Equity must guide every step of the process, from defining who is most affected by and vulnerable to climate impacts to determining how decisions are made and whose knowledge is incorporated.

Engagement must avoid practices that treat community members as symbolic participants or sources of information without real influence. Too often, individuals are asked to share their experiences and provide input, but are not actually meaningfully involved in shaping decisions or included in follow-up to see how their contributions are incorporated. For example, a community might be invited to give feedback, but then the final plan moves forward without reflecting those concerns or perspectives in the end. Effective engagement ensures that decisions reflect what people value about their community.



FRAMEWORK

To operationalize the best practices, Climate Access developed a framework that outlines engagement approaches to help communities move from awareness and readiness to decision-making and action. Communities will always have different starting points, so this framework is designed to be adaptable across a range of contexts.

In some places, conversations about impacts and adaptation may already be well underway. In others, engagement may begin through more immediate concerns such as housing or health before climate impacts are explicitly discussed. The framework is intended to meet communities where they are and build on existing priorities and levels of readiness.

Drawing from the [U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit's Steps to Resilience](#), the framework aligns engagement approaches with different phases of adaptation planning. Some communities may move quickly through these phases, while others may need more time to build understanding, trust and consensus. New climate impacts, changing priorities or concerns raised by community members may also lead communities to revisit earlier phases before making decisions about next steps.

These steps involve government decision makers and community leaders working together to address climate risks by forming a group to explore local climate issues, listing their community assets (the things they want to protect), determining which assets could be harmed by climate-related hazards, investigating possible solutions, making plans to address their greatest concerns and taking action to implement their plans.

GETTING STARTED: DISCOVERY AND PLANNING

Create a Communications Plan

A communications and engagement plan provides a roadmap for how you will involve community members and other stakeholders throughout the planning process. Before selecting engagement activities, it is important to clarify your objectives for outreach including what decisions are being made and what level of participation is needed at this stage. The [Movement Strategy Center's Spectrum of Engagement to Ownership](#) can be a useful guide, recognizing that engagement exists along a continuum from informing people about decisions to involving them in shaping and making those decisions. Different phases of resilience planning may require different approaches, with some focused on building awareness and understanding and others requiring deeper collaboration around priorities, trade-offs, and future pathways.

Identifying who is most at risk

As you develop your plan, identify who is most at risk from climate impacts and potential relocation decisions, who has decision-making authority and who influences both groups. Understanding these relationships can help ensure that engagement efforts are equitable and inclusive, while informing stakeholder mapping and outreach strategies that center those most affected by the decisions being made.

A key first step is identifying who will be most impacted by climate change and which groups may face the greatest barriers to participating in planning efforts. This includes frontline and historically underserved communities as well as individuals who have been excluded from decision-making processes in the past. Reviewing previous planning efforts, policies, and engagement processes can help identify patterns of exclusion or inequity, particularly among individuals who are Black, Indigenous, immigrant, elderly, low-income or otherwise marginalized. Acknowledging these histories early can help establish trust and create a stronger foundation for participation.

Suggested resource: [*Racial Equity Toolkit: An Opportunity to Operationalize Equity, ICLEI: Equity in Climate Planning: Trends and Best Practices for U.S. Local Governments. Concrete best practices for integrating equity and engagement into climate planning at the local level.*](#)



Early Conversations and Relationship Building

Early conversations with community-based organizations, Tribal representatives, local institutions and other trusted leaders can help practitioners understand the local context before broader public engagement begins. These discussions can reveal existing community networks, past experiences with planning processes, key concerns and opportunities for partnership, helping to inform outreach strategies and build relationships that support meaningful engagement over time.

People are more likely to participate in difficult conversations when the information is coming from a trusted messenger. Interviews and small group discussions with trusted leaders that are from and/or work with those stakeholder groups can provide insights on how to talk about climate change with them and the best methods and channels for engagement. Insights from these conversations should directly shape the outreach plan and engagement approaches.

Communities are not blank slates. Some people may be navigating climate impacts or recovering past disasters, as well as carrying memories of previous planning efforts that will shape how new initiatives are viewed. Effective engagement begins by understanding these existing dynamics and realizing that talking about relocation won't be the starting point.

Early engagement should focus on creating opportunities to explore shared lived experiences, values, concerns regarding climate impacts and potential responses. An effective outreach process incorporates community perspectives right from the start so that strategies reflect local priorities, rather than relying solely on technical data or external assumptions. At this early stage, it is important to clearly define the purpose of engagement. Community members should understand how their input will shape decisions and what outcome may emerge.

Centering Equity and Indigenous Knowledge

Equity and climate justice considerations should be integrated throughout every phase of engagement rather than treated as a separate component of the process.

This includes partnering directly with Tribal governments and Indigenous organizations from the outset, respecting cultural practices and knowledge systems and compensating Indigenous partners for their time and expertise.

Suggested resource: *Climate Change & Building Adaptive Capacity Across Indian Country-First Nations Development Institute*

Mapping Relationships and Influence

Power mapping can help clarify who holds decision-making authority, who carries community trust and how relationships between organizations and residents shape local dynamics. This process often works best when community partners collaboratively create a stakeholder map identifying:

- Formal decision-makers
- Trusted local leaders
- Nonprofits and advocacy organizations
- State and local agencies
- Informal community influencers

Community partners can map these relationships using sticky notes, large-format paper exercises on table tops or easels, or digital whiteboard tools, to better understand dynamics and potential for collaboration.

Suggested resources: *The Commons Social Change Library: Power and Power Mapping, Participatory Asset Mapping: A community research lab toolkit that guides the process of mapping community assets.*

Assessing Awareness and Readiness

Early public outreach to community members can also help practitioners better understand broader awareness of climate risks and openness to different adaptation approaches. Focus groups, interview and short surveys (online, by phone or in-person) can help assess:

- Awareness of climate risks
- Gaps in understanding
- Existing concerns and priorities
- Willingness to explore adaptation options
- Identification of trusted messengers and influential stakeholders

OPENING THE CONVERSATION: UNDERSTANDING PRIORITIES

Conversations about climate preparedness should create opportunities for communities to explore risks, vulnerabilities, and potential solutions together rather than presenting predetermined outcomes. At this stage, engagement is focused on building a shared understanding of local climate impacts, identifying community priorities and considering a range of possible adaptation pathways. Practitioners can support this process by creating space for residents to share their experiences, concerns, values and aspirations while learning from one another and from technical information. The goal is not to arrive at immediate decisions, but to help communities develop a shared understanding of the challenges ahead and the options available to them.

Working with Trusted Messengers and Multiple Channels

Building trust requires long-term relationship development. Community members should be compensated for their expertise and participation through paid community partner roles, stipends, or leadership opportunities. Transparency is equally important. Ongoing feedback loops can help residents see how their input is influencing decisions in real time.

Effective outreach requires using a mix of communication channels and engagement opportunities to connect with people where they already gather, receive information, and spend their time. **No single communication method will reach everyone**, so practitioners should combine in-person, offline, and digital approaches to broaden participation and reduce barriers to engagement.

Different communication tools can serve different purposes:

- Tabling at community events, farmers markets, festivals, school events, and other local gatherings can help raise awareness, build relationships, conduct informal surveys, and gather input from people who may not attend formal meetings.
- Workshops, listening sessions, interviews, and focus groups can provide opportunities for deeper dialogue and discussion.
- Flyers, posters, direct mail, local radio, newspapers, and community newsletters can help reach residents who may have limited internet access or prefer traditional sources of information.
- Social media, text messaging, WhatsApp groups, videos, and other shareable digital content can help communicate key information, answer questions, and keep community members informed between engagement activities.
- Community newsletters, neighborhood message boards, and partner organizations can provide ongoing updates and amplify messages through trusted networks.

Using a variety of communication channels helps ensure that information reaches different segments of the community while creating multiple opportunities for people to participate in ways that are convenient and comfortable for them. Engagement approaches should be accessible in terms of physical ability, languages spoken in the community, literacy levels and cultural contexts. Materials should be made available in multiple formats and designed with plain language rather than technical jargon.

Suggested resource: *C40 Knowledge Hub: How to engage stakeholders for powerful and inclusive climate action planning*, *Spitfire Smart Chart how-to guide to communications planning*

Communicating about Risk

Whether through presentations, workshops, outreach materials, community conversations, or other engagement activities, communication about climate risks should help people connect technical information to their lived experiences. Rather than overwhelming people with scientific, technical, or policy information, start with what community members are already seeing and experiencing. Changes such as more frequent flooding, extreme heat, erosion, wildfire smoke, or disruptions to livelihoods can serve as entry points for discussing broader climate risks and future challenges.

Technical information, such as flood projections, sea level rise maps, or hazard assessments, can then be introduced gradually using local examples and stories that help people understand how future changes may affect the places, traditions, and resources they value most. Framing climate impacts in relation to shared community priorities can help build a sense of collective purpose and create opportunities for productive dialogue. These conversations should acknowledge both the human and economic costs of inaction while emphasizing how proactive planning can help communities protect what matters most and expand future options.

Framing the conversation

Facts alone are not enough to help people make difficult decisions. Conversations about climate adaptation are shaped more by values and identity, than scientific data. Depending on what stakeholders are most concerned about, discussions may resonate more when connected to issues of health and safety, economic stability, housing, access to values, places, and protecting families. Tailoring messages to reflect different concerns and shared values can help build trust and a sense of shared purpose.

“Framing” is how information is presented and positioned, what is emphasized and what is excluded, and how an issue is connected to lived experience. Messages can be shaped around what people care more about and what can be gained by taking action, rather than focusing solely on risk or loss. Inclusive language like “we” can help reinforce collective responsibility. Avoid apocalyptic or overly technical frames. Instead, emphasize resilience, justice and renewal.

“Narratives” are also important, and are a collection of stories that help people make sense of an issue and their role in it. Narratives are more effective when they emphasize shared values, collective action and a positive vision for the future.

Stories of hope can inspire participation and can counter feelings of fear and fatalism, whereas fear-based messages can alienate people and make challenges feel overwhelming. Plain language with relatable examples that highlight protecting what we love and connect to shared well-being can build a sense of forward momentum and hope. Balance discussion of risks with examples of what proactive planning can protect or improve.

Suggested resource: *C40 Cities: Inclusive Climate Action Communications Toolkit with strategies to craft clear, culturally responsive, hope-oriented messages.*

Using visual storytelling

Visuals can be incorporated into presentations, workshops, outreach materials, websites, social media content and community conversations to help deliver the narrative and make complex issues more accessible and meaningful. Graphics, maps, videos, photographs and personal stories can help people connect technical information to local places, experiences and values while creating opportunities for dialogue about future risks and possibilities.

Visual materials might include timelines showing historical changes, before-and-after images, infographics, flood or heat maps and illustrations of potential adaptation strategies. These tools can help residents better understand climate risks while supporting conversations about community priorities and future choices.

Storymapping can be particularly effective because it combines maps, photos, images and personal narratives in a single format. By bringing together technical information and lived experiences, storymaps can help communities explore how climate change is already affecting their community, what may change in the future and how different adaptation pathways could shape local outcomes. They can also serve as valuable tools for documenting community knowledge and elevating local voices throughout the planning process.

Examples: *NOAA story maps, Climate Centre Story Map Library, ArcGIS storymaps*

Listening and reflecting

If a community is just beginning conversations about climate impacts and potential future changes, the initial focus should be on listening rather than moving immediately to technical planning discussions.

Listening sessions, storytelling opportunities or informal conversations help people reflect on what changes they're already seeing and how climate impacts are affecting their daily life, as well as the things that they value about their community. These early conversations should focus on building trust and creating a shared understanding or local priorities before moving into discussions about specific adaptation strategies. As trust grows, a more structured approach can be used to explore priorities in more detail. Practices like participatory mapping, small group dialogue and visioning exercises can help identify important places and goals for the future.

Suggested resource: *UNDP Community Listening in Practice: A guide to deep listening and ensuring that engagement is not extractive but rooted in respect and equity.*

Removing barriers to participation is critical. People are more likely to engage in a meaningful way when gatherings are designed to be accessible and welcoming. This may include:

- offering meetings at different times and locations
- providing childcare, meals, transportation, or stipends
- attending existing community events
- using interpreters and plain language practices
- ensuring materials are available in multiple languages and formats

Participation should also accommodate different communication styles and comfort levels. Some individuals may feel more comfortable contributing through written reflections, paired conversations, art or small-group dialogue rather than speaking in large public meetings. Trusted facilitators and clearly established ground rules can help create spaces where people feel respected, heard and able to participate meaningfully.

INVESTIGATING OPTIONS: EXPLORING SOLUTIONS AND TRADE-OFFS

As communities begin evaluating adaptation options, engagement shifts from building awareness toward exploring possible responses to climate risks.

Community members can work together to understand different pathways, weigh benefits and drawbacks and consider how options align with community priorities and values.

Using Data to Support Dialogue

At this stage, communities may have already produced tools like compound flooding maps, vulnerability scores and asset inventories. These resources can inform conversations when combined with dialogue that asks:

- What places feel most important to protect?
- What changes are people already experiencing?
- Where are current systems falling short?
- What trade-offs feel acceptable or unacceptable to residents?
- What would long-term safety and quality of life require?

Maps that combine sea level rise, storm surge, groundwater rise or other overlapping hazards can help residents better understand compound risks and the limitations of certain infrastructure solutions over time.

Community members can also be invited to create their own maps identifying places of personal significance, as well as areas where they feel concerned about future change. Comparing historical and current imagery of neighborhoods can help communities visualize gradual change that may otherwise feel abstract or difficult to discuss.

Participatory and gamified approaches

Interactive activities can help residents engage with complex decisions in ways that feel more collaborative and less overwhelming. Participatory role-playing exercises, planning simulations, and games can allow community members to experience different perspectives and better understand the trade-offs others may face. For example, activities such as the “Game of Floods” board game-style planning exercise can help residents work through adaptation scenarios while considering social, economic, environmental and cultural impacts.

Using arts and experiential approaches

Experiential education through art, photography, theater, music and movement to help people express emotions and connect their personal experiences, reflecting on their history and envisioning the future. Hands-on art processes help people acknowledge feelings of grief, envision a new future and express their feelings in a less polarizing way. Possible approaches include:

- World Café-style dialogues can encourage rotating small-group conversations around questions such as “What makes this community livable?” or “What would a safer future look like for our children?”
- Guided story circles can invite residents to reflect on change, loss, belonging and possibility.
- Participatory mural projects, oral histories, musical performances or photography exhibits can be ways to share local knowledge and goals and lay the cultural groundwork for dialogue.

Suggested resources: *HighWaterLine Project*: Public art installations marking projected flood levels to spark local climate dialogue, *Cooling Murals*: Murals use reflective paints that are typically applied to roofs and pavement to lower surface temperatures. By turning this cooling technology into place-based artwork, they highlight the urban heat island effect and encourage community-driven climate action.

Exploring trade-offs

As communities move further into adaptation planning, community members may begin weighing difficult trade-offs. These discussions require patience and transparency. Rushing communities toward decisions can erode trust and undermine the process. Acknowledge what is not yet known about timing, funding or future impacts but also tap uncertainty as a reason to act, promoting practical strategies that reduce risk and offer multiple benefits to people and communities such as cost savings and greater security.

Visioning and scenario planning can help individuals reflect on what they value most about their community, what they hope future generations will have, what risks feel acceptable and what conditions would make relocating a viable consideration. These conversations shouldn't frame relocation as inevitable, as that may trigger fear or disengagement. Instead, focus on exploring options together and understanding the implications of different pathways.

PRIORITIZING ACTIONS: DEVELOPING PLANS

As communities move from exploring options to selecting priorities, engagement should focus on helping residents understand choices, evaluate alternatives and shape implementation strategies.

At this stage, transparency becomes more important than ever. Community members should understand how decisions are being made, what constraints exist, how trade-offs are being evaluated and how public input is influencing outcomes.

WHEN RELOCATION IS BEING CONSIDERED

When relocation becomes a potential adaptation strategy, engagement requires additional care and support. Discussions may involve grief, uncertainty, identity, cultural continuity, place attachment and concerns about the future of the community.

Framing Relocation Conversations

Many people hear the term “managed retreat” and immediately shut down. It can feel technical, distant, threatening or like a loss of control. Instead, focus on relocation as a step toward safety, healing, and protecting what matters most can build hope and a shared purpose.

- Phrases like “moving forward together”, “building a safer future,” or “protecting what we love” create a sense of collective empowerment.
- “Community-led climate mobility” is a frame to consider as a way to avoid negative associations with the term relocation, while emphasizing leadership and choice.
- Use phrases like “exploring options together” and “planning for our children’s future” to avoid polarization.

Incorporating a Trauma-informed Approach

Climate impacts and previous planning processes may affect how people participate in engagement efforts. Trauma-informed approaches help create conditions where people feel respected and able to fully engage.

Trauma-informed practices can include:

- creating predictable and transparent processes
- clearly communicating expectations and decision-making authority
- offering multiple ways for people to participate
- avoiding unnecessary pressure to share personal experiences
- providing opportunities for participants to take breaks
- ensuring facilitators are prepared to respond respectfully to emotional reactions

The goal is not to directly treat trauma, but to design engagement processes that foster trust and reduce the potential for harm.

Suggested resource: *Strategic Dialogue and Engagement for Climate Adaptation - Trauma-informed Practices*

Creating Space for Reflection and Grief

Climate relocation conversations should create space for reflection and emotional processing rather than rushing toward technical solutions. Community members should be recognized as experts in their own experiences, with conversations designed to validate experiences and hear concerns.

Some participants may experience grief as they consider the potential loss of place and social connections. Acknowledge these emotions and offer to connect participants with mental health resources to help navigate these challenges.

Suggested resources: *Good Grief Network, Coping with the Climate Crisis - Rosemary Randall and Hope in the Face of Climate Change - Susanne Moser*

Maintaining Transparency and Ongoing Connection

Ensure that communities have regular opportunities to ask questions and express input on how decisions are being made. Ongoing communication helps prevent misinformation and reduces confusion through the process. Engagement shouldn't end after a single workshop or outreach event. Create opportunities for continuous feedback that enable individuals to stay informed and connected. This can include:

- public dashboards showing planning updates and decisions
- community newsletters and message boards
- regular check-ins and listening sessions
- updated FAQs and resource guides
- opportunities for residents to respond to proposals and next steps

Community members are more likely to remain engaged when they can see how their perspectives are being integrated into decision making. Even after major decisions are made, relationship building remains important. Communities navigating climate relocation often experience long timelines and ongoing uncertainty, as well as shifting climate impacts. Maintaining transparency and continuing to build connections can help strengthen resilience.





CONCLUSION

Climate relocation is among the most challenging issues facing communities in the Southeast. It is about protecting social and economic connections and identity. Effective engagement means involving community members from the beginning, providing multiple ways to participate, showing how public input influences decisions, and ensuring that those most affected have a meaningful role in shaping the future of their community.

By integrating equity and justice at every stage, building trust, and communicating authentically, community-led relocation can be an opportunity for clarity and strength rather than a source of further harm. For Southeast communities facing increasingly severe and frequent climate impacts, this approach provides a path forward that acknowledges shared history and builds collective power to move forward together.

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