

Freeport residents unite to tackle climate change

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Freeport Climate Action Now hosted a public climate forum at Meetinghouse Arts on March 12. *Laura Sitterly / The Times Record*

On March 12 at Meetinghouse Arts, Freeport Climate Action Now ([FreeportCAN](#)) held a climate forum exploring solutions to climate change at individual, local, state and federal levels.

From policies to grassroots efforts in neighborhoods, climate action is happening, and it's working — or so the event sought to prove.

Panelists included Susana Hancock, global mountains director at the [International Cryosphere Climate Initiative](#); Brian Ambrette, senior climate resilience coordinator with the [Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future](#); Valy Steverlynck, [Freeport Sustainability Advisory Board](#) co-chairperson; and Kathleen Sullivan, FreeportCAN coordinator.

Abigail Hayne, youth climate engagement fellow with the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future, was the facilitator.



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The first half of the evening allowed each speaker to explain what was happening at each level of government they represented.

"As a psychotherapist for 50 years, I have a deep understanding of mental health," Sullivan said. "To cope with what's happening, we must come together. This is both therapeutic and a form of resistance. ... When we stand in solidarity, it scares authoritarian forces."

Inspired by Joanna Macy's idea that "action is the antidote to despair," the gathering aimed to provide participants with actionable steps for climate progress in 2025 and beyond.

"As community leaders, stakeholders and activists, we must remain committed to taking bold steps to accelerate the transition to a sustainable future," Hancock said.



Kathleen Sullivan takes the podium at FreeportCAN's public climate forum on March 12. *Laura Sitterly / The Times Record*

What are we to do?

FreeportCAN was established during the COVID-19 pandemic. It started with a Zoom forum that attracted hundreds, then, in 2021, transitioned to outdoor picnic tables.

During that time, diseases and wildfires were widespread, but the planet had not yet surpassed the critical limit of a 1.5-degree Celsius rise that scientists had long warned about. By 2023, events were held in person, climate change discussions became more open, and many households adopted solar heat pumps and electric lawnmowers.

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"We were making strides, slowly, but still, we were moving forward," Sullivan said. "That feels like a long time ago. We find ourselves eight weeks into a presidential administration, and many are scared. Temperatures have surpassed the critical threshold, and there's a crack in the foundation of our democracy."

In her address, Sullivan cited recent actions — declaring an energy emergency that lifted federal oil and natural gas drilling regulations and removed climate change language from federal documents.

“It’s as though ignoring the reality of climate change, there’s this misconstrued belief it can be erased as a threat,” Sullivan said. “What are we to do?”

The evening centered on a key question: What are the impacts of federal mandates and what power do local authorities have? As one, experts and community members engaged in discussion to find a path from fear to empowered action.

Federal action

Hancock’s presentation focused on climate effort trends at both the national and international levels. She expressed concerns about eliminating environmental regulations and federal jobs, which could hinder scientific research and result in gaps in data collection.

“What concerns me is that as a country, we don’t fully understand the long-term consequences of our current actions,” Hancock said. “These repercussions may be permanent on human timescales.”

Regardless, she remains (cautiously) optimistic. For example, although the U.S. withdrew from the [Paris Climate Agreement](#), it has not yet exited the [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#).

In 2019, Maine joined the [U.S. Climate Alliance](#) with initiatives to ensure local and state efforts remain aligned with the Paris Climate Agreement. The alliance has conjured momentum that other New England states have run with — for example, Rhode Island and Massachusetts’ recent proposal of a [carbon tax](#) levied on polluters.

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Similarly, while the U.S. delegation has withdrawn from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s (IPCC) drafting meetings and ceased contributions to climate damage compensation funds, experts like Hancock are still invited by groups like the IPCC to stay involved in the global conversation.

“I am inspired by the sheer number of individuals engaged in this fight, fighting as though their lives depend on it — because, for many, they do,” Hancock said. “We have several stopgap measures in place, but our success as a nation will now come from within. From us.”



Jim Hazell of Bristol Parks and Recreation recovers a door from the Bell House at Pemaquid Point Lighthouse on Jan. 10, 2024. The lighthouse was damaged after being struck by high waves and wind gusts the day before. *Derek Davis / Portland Press Herald*
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State action

Reflecting on last January's devastating storms, Ambrette acknowledged that climate change is happening here in Maine. His conversation centered on the state's direction amidst uncertainty and painted a picture of what would come over the next four years.

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Taking the podium, he outlined some of the recent moves [lawmakers](#) have made: the updated [Climate Action Plan](#) published in November, the release of interim recommendations from the Governor's Infrastructure Rebuilding and Resilience Commission, the award of \$69 million in [federal funds](#) for climate resilience initiatives and the establishment of a new [Office of Community Affairs](#), which will take shape this summer.

“People roll their eyes when they hear about another planning process,” Ambrette said. “But Maine ranks fifth nationally in grant dollars received per capita because of our success in planning for projects, ensuring they’re ready to go when opportunities present themselves.”

The Infrastructure Rebuilding and Resilience Commission will present a final set of recommendations this May. The initial list includes immediate actions, like enhancing the electric grid, to increase storm preparedness and establish a stronger foundation of climate resilience across state and local governments.

One bill from the commission, LD 1, is currently under review. It proposes three initiatives to improve storm preparedness: a home resiliency program, the launch of a state resilience office and “flood-ready program,” and the enhancement of hazard mitigation communications.

Ambrette encouraged those hoping to secure state funding that benefits their communities to submit written testimonies in favor of the legislation.

As for the new Office of Community Affairs, the building will consolidate seven existing programs that support local land use, housing, floodplain and climate resilience planning to create a one-stop shop where locals can seek advice and assistance with grants.

“Washington, D.C. may retreat from climate action, but states like Maine and towns like Freeport are emerging as bright spots,” Ambrette said. “More than 260 towns and tribes actively participate in the Community Resilience Partnership, receiving grant climate projects. Although challenges lie ahead, there is growing momentum.”



Valy Steverlynck takes the podium at FreeportCAN's public climate forum on March 12. *Laura Sitterly / The Times Record*

Town action

Steverlynck noted the recent and potential future state funding that could benefit Freeport.

Last year, the town received a community resiliency grant, which led to the drafting and approval of the [Climate Action Plan](#) in December.

The plan serves as a roadmap, offering steps to curb greenhouse gas emissions — aspiring for net-zero municipal emissions by 2040 — and adapt to climate change. With most emissions resulting from transportation, in 2025, the town is focused on improving multiuse

paths to make them more accessible and connecting green spaces to improve walk/bike-ability.

Freeport is also installing new electric vehicle chargers this spring. Soon, there will be two level 2 chargers at the library with four ports and two at the Town Hall.

The second grant the town has applied for, if awarded, would fund the creation of a cooling/warming center at the Freeport Community Library.

“We are concerned about federal funding as this trickles down to us,” Steverlynck said. “We are, though, encouraged by the state’s commitment to provide support. And we have loyal public-private partnerships.”

Local action

There are many options for those hoping to get involved at the grassroots level.

FreeportCAN recently formed emergency resilience neighborhood hubs. These meetings consist of potluck meals and conversations about what community members need to feel more secure — transportation, medicine, a generator and food. Each group has a designated leader who collects information and coordinates efforts to help attendees.

The organization also offers a [climate crisis support group](#), facilitated by Mair Honan, at the library on the first and third Tuesdays of each month.

“Whether you’re concerned about the global climate crisis or government instability, this is a group where you can gain support,” Sullivan said. “We may not know where things are going, but let’s recognize and embrace the possibilities with courage.”

For tips on living a low-carbon lifestyle, sign up for the free Eco-Homes newsletter at freeportcan.org/ecohomes.

This spring, Freeport residents will gain access to a new tool library, allowing them to borrow equipment like electric lawnmowers from the public works department for their landscaping needs before returning it for others to use.



Fresh carrots from Andy Valley farm. FreeportCAN encourages locals to purchase produce at the town farmers market from May 31 to Sept. 29. *Courtesy of FreeportCAN*

“Climate change can feel veiled or distant,” Sullivan said. “We wake up, the day seems fine, and it’s easy to forget when we are preoccupied with more immediate issues. That’s why we need to rethink the future of climate activism, which is not as rooted in striving but an ethic of care. Without federal support, the action falls on our shoulders. Coming together is crucial for preserving our spirits and caring for our land.”



Kathleen Sullivan at the Freeport Farmers Market on Aug. 7, 2024. *Courtesy of FreeportCAN*

Positioning Freeport as a national leader

Before the event, FreeportCAN prepared some anticipated questions, such as: Should Regional School Unit 5 develop a climate change curriculum? Should Maine join neighboring states in suing the petroleum industry for its role in global warming? To what extent is state climate action dependent on federal funding?

Participants had their sights set on the bigger picture.

The first question asked how the state can show national leadership. Ambrette reiterated Maine’s active role in the U.S. Climate Alliance and its Infrastructure Commission, which conducts data analysis to improve flood understanding and protect communities and working waterfronts.

The second was how Freeport could gain national visibility.

“We share Maquoit Bay with Brunswick,” Steverlynck said. “To the south, we share waterways with other communities, like Yarmouth. So, when drafting our action plans, we communicate with nearby municipalities because climate change is not a town issue — or even a Maine issue. It’s a challenge we must all coordinate efforts to address together.”

To connect with any panelist speakers or get involved with FreeportCAN, contact climate@freeportcan.org.

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