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Atlantic County Coastal Region (ACCR) Executive Summary





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ATLANTIC COUNTY COASTAL REGION

INTRODUCTION

Consistent with the State of New Jersey's efforts to foster community-driven approaches to long-term planning for climate change and its impacts on the built and natural environment, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) initiated the Resilient NJ program. The statewide program builds on existing efforts and capabilities to create and implement creative regional planning solutions to address the growing risk of climate hazards, specifically coastal impacts like storm flooding and sea level rise. This process is being implemented in four separate regions across the state and will result in the development of a Regional Resilience and Adaptation Action Plan (Action Plan) for each region. The Action Plan will align local visions with projects and implementation strategies led by local communities in each region to help create a more flood-resilient future.

This Planning Context document is specific to the Atlantic County Coastal Region (ACCR), composed of the municipalities of Atlantic City, Brigantine, Longport, Margate, Northfield, Pleasantville, and Ventnor, as well as Atlantic County and the American Red Cross of New Jersey, which serves as the local communitybased organization partner. See Figure ES-1 for a map of the ACCR.¹



Figure ES-1. Map of Resilient NJ ACCR, 2021

This Planning Context document serves as the first chapter in the Action Plan and provides baseline information and a repository of the ACCR's history, challenges, and initiatives along with a snapshot of social, public policy, and economic context for the ACCR. Through research, data analysis, a review of previous and current planning efforts, and conversations with local stakeholders, the Planning Context provides a basic understanding the state of resilience today. It provides a common language and themes for the region, and it identifies the projects, policies, and programs that have proven successful or ineffectual in promoting environmental, economic, and social resilience.

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NJ Department of Environmental Protection. Resilient NJ. 2020. https://www.nj.gov/dep/bcrp/resilientnj/about.html.

POPULATION

The ACCR is densely populated, consisting of approximately 92,000 people living across 30 square miles of land. The region consists of two barrier islands, Brigantine and Absecon Island, separated from the mainland by a series of bays (referred to in this report as the back bay), as well as the bayside communities of Northfield and Pleasantville located on the mainland. The ACCR is demographically diverse, with a wide range of ages and ethnicities calling it home. Much of the ethnic diversity is concentrated in Atlantic City and Pleasantville, where significant Latinx, Asian, and Black communities reside. While the populations of specific demographics groups are increasing,

The overall ACCR has generally lost population over the past 10 years because out-migration to other parts of South Jersey and the rest of the country that has not been replaced by inmigration or natural births. In turn, the average age across the ACCR has been rising, and school enrollment rates have trended downward.

The ACCR's gradual decrease in population is paired with an economic contraction since approximately 2005. For decades, Atlantic City has been a resort destination, and the gaming and casino industry has been the center of economic activity since casinos were legalized in the city in 1976. With expanded legalization of casinos and gambling elsewhere in the Northeast United States, the advent of onlinegambling, and other macroeconomic changes and shocks that hit Atlantic City, the ACCR has experienced an acute economic downturn that has affected thousands of jobs within the ACCR and surrounding communities.

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Figure ES 2. Population Change in Percentage from 2010 to 2019.

This has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 through 2021. The downturn has somewhat stratified the local economies within the ACCR, as beach communities like Ventnor, Margate, Longport, and Brigantine increasingly become vacation-home communities with a seasonal population instead of bedroom communities for Atlantic City. Remote working has affected this trend, where more individuals who previously needed to commute are seeing to work from the beach communities. Despite the downturn, casino revenues have generally stabilized in recent years, and other avenues of growth have begun

to diversify the economic base, such as the establishment of Richard Stockton University's Atlantic City campus, and the upcoming installation of offshore wind facilities.

ECONOMY

These new economic drivers complement the region's natural and manmade attractions, which attract upwards of 150,000 visitors on summer weekends. Access is a fundamental issue in the ACCR, where connections for vehicular, boat, and train traffic are needed to reach destinations along the beaches and bays, particularly on Absecon and Brigantine Islands. Accessibility is important not only to summer vacationers, but also in advance and during a coastal storm when evacuation is required and in the aftermath during recovery and rebuilding. Housing, infrastructure, education, economic growth, and ecological protection are all essential components described in existing plans and identified by Resilient NJ stakeholders for building capacity for longrange resilience and adaptation in this coastal region.

CLIMATE

The economic context of the region is inherently tied to its geographic location along the Jersey Shore and its easy access to inland population centers in New Jersey and neighboring states. However, this idyllic beach setting presents the ongoing risk of coastal storms and the increasing threat of climate change, which is projected to increase the volume of annual precipitation, the frequency and intensity of storms, and threaten low-lying areas exposed to sea level rise (SLR) and erosion. When Superstorm Sandy hit the region in 2012, it highlighted these risks, causing widespread damage across the ACCR and emphasizing the urgency of protecting the region from current and future climate risks. Storms since then continue to demonstrate the consequences of climate change in the region.

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Figure ES 3. Employment Density in the Atlantic County Coastal Region.

Two major categories of coastal impacts are:

 High tide flooding (sunny day flooding): as sea levels rise, flooding can occur even when there's no storm. This can cause property devaluation and can interrupt daily life of affected communities. With SLR, more frequent flooding will affect infrastructure in the floodplain such as increased corrosion from saltwater penetration, which can lead to faster degradation and more frequent repair needs. Less frequent but higher-impact events include the moon tide and king tide, when high tide levels are above normal at monthly or annual intervals. High tide flooding is increasingly frequent.

Extreme storms (precipitation, wind, and storm surge): derechos and hurricanes continue to threaten public health and safety and can lead to loss of life and property, costly damages to community infrastructure (e.g., power systems, transportation, grocery stores), contamination (e.g., spills of hazardous materials), and economic impacts (e.g., loss in tax revenue, disrupted supply chains, reduction in tourism expenditures). Ocean- and bay- facing properties face damage from wind and wave action, while

ATLANTIC COUNTY COASTAL REGION (ACCR) RESILIENCE AND ADAPTATION ACTION PLAN

storm surge and inland flooding affect both the barrier islands and back bay areas. Extreme storms can also accelerate erosion and sedimentation, wreak havoc on sensitive ecosystems, and cause trauma for local populations – particularly socially vulnerable populations who may have fewer accessible resources to prepare and respond effectively.

In Atlantic City, the frequency of tidal flooding events has increased from an average of less than one event per year in the 1950s to an average of eight events per year from 2007 to 2016 – and in 2018 alone, Atlantic City experienced 18 such high-tide flood events.²

Some of the worst impacts of these events can be found along the back bays, where bulkheads and other flood mitigation measures are surpassed and low-lying homes, roadways, other infrastructure, businesses, and natural resources are damaged.



Image: Flooding from Winter Storm Jonas in Brigantine. Source: Brigantine Now



Image: Dune scarps in Ventnor after 2019 Storm. Source: NJ.com, Lori M. Nichols

² The Press of Atlantic City, Rutgers: New Jersey shore sea rise is more than double the global average, December 16, 2019, https://pressofatlanticcity.com/news/local/ rutgers-new-jersey-shore-sea-rise-is-more-than-double-the-global-average/article_4d7de8da-06e6-584a-ab57-83bba532b246.html.



ATLANTIC COUNTY COASTAL REGION (ACCR) RESILIENCE AND ADAPTATION ACTION PLAN





Figure ES 3. USACE 'Tentatively Selected Plan' for Storm Risk Management in ACCR and its neighbors

Past and present initiatives to increase resilience to floods and extreme weather include a range of solutions from filling sinkholes at the water's edge along bulkheads to educational and emergency preparedness programs to broader storm recovery projects implemented to repair the ACCR's assets and infrastructure following the significant impacts of Superstorm Sandy and other coastal storms.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) has also released a 'Tentatively Selected Plan' for reducing the risk of flood damages associated with storm surge, as outlined in the New Jersey Back Bays Coastal Storm Risk Management Study.³ The plan is not yet approved by Congress and is not currently funded for implementation at state or federal levels.

³ US Army Corps of Engineers, Philadelphia District & Marine Design Center Website: New Jersey Back Bays Coastal Storm Risk Management Study, August 2021, https://www.nap.usace.army.mil/Missions/Civil-Works/New-Jersey-Back-Bays-Study/.



PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL VULNERABILITY

Sea level has increased at approximately 0.157 inches/year since the early 1900s in the region, that not only increases flooding and severe storms, but also wave action and coastal erosion that is a concern for the population and infrastructure. The population in the ACCR along with critical assets, community facilities, and a high percentage of "second" homes are located in flood prone and otherwise hazardous areas. This requires significant investment in education, design, construction, maintenance, and emergency management for reducing risks and protecting people and infrastructure.

It is imperative that projects and policies are based on both current and projected future sea level rise data as well as other climate data on increasing temperatures and more frequent and intense precipitation events, which can have adverse effects on public health, infrastructure, business continuity, and ecological resources - including wetlands and marshlands that provide habitat, recreational spaces, wave attenuation, and other sustainability and resilience benefits.

The ACCR is home to socially vulnerable populations (SVPs), defined by DEP as those prone to negative health, financial, and housing impacts from natural disasters that can have difficulty recovering from such events. Identification of SVPs considers age, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic indicators, housing and transportation, household composition, and disability or special needs.



Figure ES 4. Indicators of Socioeconomic Status in the ACCR

SVPs have historically been disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards, health risks associated with air pollution, water pollution and toxics releases; inadequate housing, education, jobs training, and job opportunities; and challenges related to access to resources that impact quality of life.

As communities plan for climate resilience and adaptation, it common for uncertainty, fear and distrust to arise for stakeholders, particularly those who have experienced a history of civil rights violations, broken promises, confusing recovery strategies, and disinvestment. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted these concerns, and issues of environmental justice are at the forefront of resilience planning across the state. ACCR stakeholders are resolved to consider social and economic issues when approaching future resilience efforts, and recent policy improvements in the state—such as New Jersey's Environmental Justice Law, N.J.S.A. 13:1D-157 – are beginning to institutionalize evaluation of facilities for their contributions to existing environmental and public health issues in overburdened communities as part of community-based planning, permitting, and project implementation⁴.

⁴ New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, Environmental Justice Overburdened Communities (OBC) September 18, 2020, https://www.nj.gov/dep/ej/ communities.html





Figure ES 5 and ES-6. Household composition, housing type, and transportation indicators in the ACCR





Figure ES 5 and ES-6. Household composition, housing type, and transportation indicators in the ACCR



RESILIENCE & ADAPTATION

The Action Plan under development is intended to build on over a decade of local and regional planning efforts, including municipal and county master plans, stormwater and hazard mitigation plans, economic development strategies, infrastructure and capital improvement plans, and other redevelopment and revitalization plans. Through this process, the ACCR recognizes the concerted effort that has gone into these processes, the existing network of partners and solutions in motion, and the benefit of harnessing these efforts to formulate an "all of the above" and widely coordinated strategy to address vulnerabilities explored in the aftermath of Hurricane Irene and Superstorm Sandy.

The table below summarizes a sample of findings related to resilience measures from the municipal and county master plans:

In addition to local master plans, each municipality has participated and continues to stay engaged in inter-municipal and regional climate-based planning efforts that have documented challenges and offered policybased and physical solutions for climate risk mitigation. Strategic Recovery Planning Reports discuss recommendations to mitigate regional risks, while more recent plans-such as the USACE Back Bays Study-seek to address long-term resilience. These plans and studies present the opportunity for more crossjurisdictional coordination (across boundaries and local-state-federal scales) for preparedness, protection, recovery, resilience and adaptation efforts.

On top of resilience planning within municipalities, utility and infrastructure agencies have adopted plans to address



Image: Underground flood control infrastructure (Baltic Avenue Canal) at Fisherman's Park in Atlantic City. Water drains from 775 acre of Streets into the canal to alleviate flooding. Photo Courtesy: Kristian Gonyea/The Press of Atlantic City

current and future climate risks. The Atlantic County Utilities Authority, NJ Department of Transportation, Stockton University, and Casino Reinvestment Development Authority are among the local agencies and communitybased organizations with initiatives to protect their assets in the region from the threat of coastal flooding. These agencies are major partners in a resilient ACCR and their input and expertise is critical to defining a resilient future.

The ACCR Action Plan is and will continue to be driven by community involvement and stakeholder feedback. In the fall of 2020, a Steering Committee was established through the Resilient NJ planning process to meet monthly, guide decision-making, and disseminate information to engage the public. An engagement plan was developed to provide a blueprint for how voices of community members, officials, and other stakeholders are to be included in Action Plan development and the methods for engaging diverse populations in effective ways.

Through an asset collection process, the ACCR has identified assets that are important to maintain and will be examining risks and

identifying opportunities to enhance regional resilience through the course of the Resilient NJ

process. The table below outlines initial themes ACCR community leaders have discussed.

Table ES-1: Resilience Components of Existing Plans and Processes

Plan	Resilience Components
Pleasantville	General Development Goals include:
2015 Pleas- antville Mater Plan Reexam- ination Report	 Manage growth while protecting against the potential negative impact of growth.
	 Keep pace with the economic climate in the City and use appropriate tools to update regulations and policies.
	Use all state and federal programs to assist in the City's revitalization.
	• Details the goals for working with the Urban Enterprise Zone (UEZ), including the amending of the UEZ Development Plan.
Atlantic City 2016 Atlantic City Re- examination Report examination Report	Consistent with state's smart growth principles of developing within areas of existing infrastructure; consistent with surrounding jurisdictions/County
	 Plan for revitalizing Atlantic City downtown core: walkable, commercially successful, vibrant, resilient infrastructure (e.g., grid resilience / microgrid outlined in separate report)
	 Diversify economy and expand tourism and recreational offerings to be more family-oriented to keep residents, create jobs, and attract new residents and employees
	 Arts District, and Eds & Meds corridor, concentration of employment, new business attraction and development, and implementation of Main Street strategies and initiatives
Margate	Since Superstorm Sandy, there has been an increased emphasis on coastal resilience.
2016 Compre- hensive Master Plan Update	 Margate has strong community outreach that has engaged the public in local environmental issues. The result of this work led to Margate receiving a Bronze rating from Sustainable New Jersey in October 2014.
	 In 2016, Margate was awarded Blue Star certification by Clean Ocean Action, an organization that works to improve the quality of marine waters off the New Jersey coast.
	 In 2014, Margate contracted a consultant to analyze flood risks. It reports that the most pressing issue facing the city and its residents is the need to elevate homes throughout the community.
	 (Margate continued) Reinforce the protective barriers around the city. Margate is exposed to flooding from storm events (such as coastal flooding and ponding) and SLR. Bayside street elevations are vulnerable to flooding during coastal storms at only 5 to 6 feet above sea level.
	 Economic plan is part of the Master Plan and details efforts for redevelopment in the Central Business District and Waterfront Special District.
Atlantic County	Goals to acknowledge and address flooding and future climate risks; promote development outside flood prone areas; diversify
	economy; improve infrastructure; preserve and enhance natural resources
2018 Master Plan	 Sustainability and resilience strategies regarding backup energy sources, acquisition of flood-prone structures, zoning and design standards, and capital investment prioritization changes



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Plan	Resilience Components
Northfield	Encourages all new development to use the latest techniques available to provide energy efficient buildings.
2008 Master	• Encourages the revision of local ordinances to accommodate the use of alternative energy sources, such as wind, solar, and geothermal
Plan Re-Exam-	sources.
ination	 Encourages the preservation of specimen trees and natural wooded areas, where possible.
	Encourage the installation of sidewalks and bikeways.
Brigantine	• Short-term actions for protecting buildings and properties through elevating (aggregated decisions of multiple property owners in
2016 Master	a neighborhood), evaluation of floodplain protection regulations and floodplain mapping, participation in FEMA Community Rating
Plan Re-exam-	System (currently Class 5 community)
ination Report	 Moderate-term actions that might involve gradual upgrading of infrastructure with green infrastructure best practices, designation as "Storm Ready Community" by National Weather Service
	 Long-term actions that anticipate eventual impacts of SLR (e.g., limit new development, elevate streets, raise bulkheads, protect shorelines); reconstruct bulkheads to protect City and individual properties
	Inter-agency/regional coordination with federal and state agencies
	Incorporate resilience into local economy
	• Area along back bay from the North End Redevelopment Area to the Brigantine Bridge of focus for adaptation/resilience measures
Longnort	
Longpon	 The application review and approval process enhances resilience by ensuring (a) conformance with the Borough Master Plan and developmental ordinances; (b) satisfaction for public safety concerns; and (c) adherence to generally accented design standards as
Planning and	recommended by board professionals and city officials
Municipal	
Land Use Law	
Framework	
Ventnor	Protect and preserve natural assets, including oceanfront, Ventnor West, bayfront, and marshes in Ventnor Heights.
2016 Ventnor	Numerous projects related to energy conservation (including Energy Audit Report for municipal buildings in August 2015).
Master Plan	Explore "aggressive policy" that promotes energy efficiency through building placement and design; solar on public buildings; electric
Reexamination	vehicle charging station installation.
Report	• Promote mass transit, bicycling (including bike lanes on Ventnor and Atlantic Avenues), and walking as alternatives to single-
	occupancy vehicles.
	Recycling and trash pickup; regularly scheduled beach & bay cleanup days.
	Analysis of storm vulnerabilities.
	Support of city Climate Adaptation Plan published 9/8/2015.
	• Designation of area in need of redevelopment: Wellington Avenue and Ventnor Plaza. Plaza owner would like to add new uses
	for parcel of land along Wellington Ave. If the city turns this into a 'redevelopment zone', it could possibly offer a deal to entice
	developers. Financial incentives could then be made available to upgrade the area. A PILOT (Payment in Lieu of Taxes), could bolster

This Planning Context chapter is intended to provide a baseline for understanding the Region's people, infrastructure, natural resources, and climate and incorporate broader goals into the development of the Action Plan. The data collected and reviewed for this document forms a foundation for the Resilient NJ planning process in which both lived experiences and modelled flooding conditions will help the ACCR evaluate risks, identify gaps in resilience planning, and spur innovative

solutions for local challenges.

This location-based analysis of where and how climate hazards manifest helps local community members and decision-makers assess what is at stake, who will be affected, and what options are available to minimize risk. Upon completion of the risk assessment, a scenario-based planning process will help brainstorm solutions and provide stakeholders with the framework to evaluate choices and trade-offs among multiple pathways toward achieving resilience and the ACCR vision and goals for the future of the region. Development of scenarios will generate suites of actions that are intended to collectively increase resilience by building on the efforts outlined in this report and expanding into new opportunities through a holistic and regional approach to climate resilience and adaptation action planning in New Jersey.

Table ES 2. ACCR Initial Priorities and Areas of Interest

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Member	Priority/Interest Areas
American Red Cross	Expand and incorporate preparedness in communities.
	 ARC can offer community tools to strengthen resilience through education, free resources, and training programs - this includes preparedness programs, youth-based programs, and business continuity programming.
	ABC seeks to pilot and establish a community preparedness foundation
Pleasantville	The Action Plan should be on target with the city's goals.
	• Many residents work in surrounding cities; it is important to consider economic actions for how region functions as a whole.
	• Pleasantville is unique in its diversity; there has been a huge shift in the last ten years with the growth of a large population of non- English speaking residents and English as a second language residents.
	• (Pleasantville continued) It is important to make sure residents have resources; undocumented immigrants, who might be residents and are afraid to reach out because of the resident status, must also be included.
	• Pleasantville has redevelopment plans that are in progress that would be beneficial for the Resilient NJ planning process to incorporate.
Atlantic City	Communities have many common challenges and assets.
	Atlantic City has a very diverse population with a high renter population.
	There are a lot of equity issues and challenges in the City and ACCR.
	• (Atlantic City continued) Atlantic City Boardwalk is one of the ACCR's assets; the boardwalk has received funding in the past and has done some improvements but there is still a long way to go.
	• The Blue Economy is a part of larger economic diversification and development plan to serve growth and sustainability goals. The City is continuing to explore installation of one or more microgrids.
	Community involvement and outreach are very important to Atlantic City along with the County's point of view and ongoing coordination.

Source: Interviews, Resilient NJ Steering Committee Meetings, January - June 2021.

Member	Priority/Interest Areas
Regional Co- ordinator	 Coastal area is an economic engine within county, state, and broader region that needs to be protected. New administration is talking about a major infrastructure bill; Action Plan must include structural, nature-based, policy, and economic development strategies that are positioned for state and federal funding. USACE Back Bay Study was refunded; FEMA has more money than it has in the past; the key is to get Atlantic County their fair share. Must coordinate with policy-makers to ensure regulations align with local realities and needs, and generate new opportunities for innovation. Energy, fishing, and beach/bay recreation and tourism help form the basis of the Blue Economy, which could generate significant growth in jobs, training programs, and research & development.
Northfield	 Important to start small and then grow the plan as we work together with other municipalities. Shared services and interdependencies can increase resilience - towns depend on each other for evacuation access. Primary focus is on emergency response and emergency management. During an emergency, there should be a regional approach so there are not duplicative processes, costs, overlapping services.
Margate	 Opportunities for shared services and program like disaster debris management would be helpful towards building resiliency. Must keep plan simple & allow actions to be attainable for communities to work together routinely. Margate, Longport, Ventnor and Atlantic City especially all have something to gain by improving shared infrastructure. Reinforce Shelter Island to absorb storm surge/effects on bayside communities.
Longport	 Preparedness, regional approach, shared services, consistency of communication are primary areas of focus. Importance of all communities working together: regionalization is key to getting the plan to work; regional approach may offer ability to secure more funding if communities are working together.
Atlantic County	 Action Plan must be realistic; funding is key. Many projects and programs are proposed that never happen because funding is not available. County is a large source of revenue and needs to be kept in mind when planning to help integrate plans across jurisdictions and stakeholders. It is important to nurture businesses and keep in mind economic sustainability.
Brigantine & Ventnor (jointly represented by one Steering Committee member)	 Infrastructure, both local and regional, is important to Brigantine and Ventnor. Shared resources and services (e.g., equipment, contracts) is necessary for increasing resilience and improving efficiency, cost and otherwise. Looking forward to prioritizing actions and projects that bring resilience in both local and regional ways