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Report from 'Communities Leading on [something you care about]'— A Common Language for Discussing Impending Doom

by Ethan Andrews

"I am a polarizing individual in our town in some ways, because I am known as an activist, and I am known as a progressive," Lesley Fernow of Dover-Foxcroft told me between sessions of the June 17 climate change convention, "Communities Leading on Climate," in Augusta. Gov. Janet Mills and U.S. Sen. Angus King and Rep. Chellie Pingree had attended to give opening remarks. The rest of the Maine Delegation had sent representatives. Gina McCarthy, White House National Climate Advisor, would deliver the keynote speech over Zoom.

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Robert Costa

Camden Conference— Robert Costa to Speak at Camden Opera House

The Camden Conference will celebrate its return to the Camden Opera House and its 35th year by hosting a conversation with CBS News Chief Election and Campaign Correspondent Robert Costa on Saturday, July 23, from 7 to 8:30 p.m.

Karin Look, president of the Camden Conference Board of Directors, will open with a brief preview of the February 2023 Conference. Veteran journalist Matt Storin, a member and past president of the conference, will lead the conversation with Costa and field audience questions.

Costa, coauthor with Bob Woodward of *Peril*, the best-selling book about the final days of the Trump presidency and the beginning of the Biden presidency, will offer insights on global and domestic political issues in this mid-term election year. He joined CBS News earlier this year after eight years with The Washington Post as a national political reporter. Previously he was moderator and managing editor of Washington Week on PBS and a political analyst for NBC News and MSNBC.

After the discussion, Costa will sign copies of *Peril*.

Tickets are \$24 for members, \$34 for nonmembers; students with ID will be admitted free at the door. To purchase, visit camdenoperahouse.com. The Camden Opera House is located at 29 Elm Street.

The Camden Conference is a nonprofit, non-partisan, volunteer-driven citizens' forum with the mission of fostering informed discourse on world issues. For more information, visit camdenconference.org.

Bremen Democrats to Hold Outdoor Summer Social

The Bremen Democratic Committee will gather outdoors at the home of Walt and Mary Voskian, located at 1132 Waldo Road, for a summer social on Saturday, June 25, from 2 to 4 p.m. The rain date is Sunday, June 26, at the same time. All registered Democrats, unenrolled progressives or other interested people in Bremen are welcome to attend. Refreshments will be served.

Democratic candidates for the Maine House and Senate will be in attendance and other local candidates have been invited; however, according to a news release, no long speeches are on the agenda for the casual gathering.

Attendees are asked, if possible, to bring a nonperishable item or a cash contribution to donate to the Waldoboro Food Pantry following the event.

Preregistration, while not required, is requested to help with planning. Email bremendemocrats@gmail.com or call Mary Voskian at 529-2511 to register or offer help.

Visit lincolncountydemocrats.com for more information, or facebook.com/lincolncountydems.

Chamber of Commerce Hosts Fundraising Auction

The Penobscot Bay Regional Chamber of Commerce Fundraising Auction, which is open to the public, will take place on Wednesday, June 22, from 4:30 to 7 p.m. at Rock Harbor Tap Room, located at 5 Payne Avenue in Rockland. The event will also serve as a send-off for outgoing Chamber President and CEO Tom Peaco, who will leave the post on June 30.

Bruce and Becky Gamage will serve as auctioneers, guiding bidders through a variety of goods, services and one-of-a-kind experiences. There will also be a collection of silent-auction items. Visit penbaychamber.com to view items included in both live and silent auctions.

Tickets are \$10 per person in advance, \$15 at the door. Hors d'oeuvres will be served and drinks will be available for purchase. Proceeds will support the chamber's economic development and tourism promotion activities.

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COMMUNITIES LEADING ON CLIMATE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

But much of the day involved local officials and activists trading ideas for dealing with the local effects of climate change and recruiting help from a population with mixed allegiances.

"I don't pretend," Fernow, a retired physician, continued. "I put campaign signs out on my lawn. I had stickers on my car in times past. [But] I also have a lot of connections in town. I had a lot of patients who loved me and miss me now that I'm no longer their doctor, so even though they're very conservative, they trust me in a different way. So I'm using that to leverage my ability to connect to people and talk to them."

Fernow and four other residents formed Dover-Foxcroft's Climate Action Advisory Committee in 2021. It was later adopted as a town subcommittee and has started a number of small initiatives that could make a difference in the long run if enough people get involved.

Sitting in a room with hundreds of like-minded people, it's easy to feel a sense of shared mission. It happens in churches and concerts. The spirit of cooperation that comes with riffing on an accepted theme in good company is strong, and at the Maine climate conference good ideas for mitigating and preparing for future hardships were abundant: expand broadband, convert to electric school buses, install electric vehicle charging stations, convert street lights to LEDs, subsidize conversions to heat pumps, and a thousand smaller initiatives.

A recurring theme on the topic climate change mitigation was not to use words like "mitigation." And if you want to appeal to the half of the population that doesn't want to hear about climate change, don't say "climate change" either.

Also, people are self-interested and like to save money.

"We just talk about mitigating hazards," Fernow said.

She described how hunters might be more receptive to talking about climate change if the conversation started on the topic of moose dying from tick infestations that have become more common as Maine winters have become milder — in May, the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife reported that 90 percent of the moose calves it had fitted with tracking collars had died; some were covered with tens of thousands of ticks. But where would the conversation go from there? How do you get from: shame about the moose, to: have you considered buying an electric car?

"Let's use an easier one, because I'm not sure what to say about ticks," she said, pivoting to an audience of fishermen. "A lot of people where we live fish, and so you can talk about clean water and the importance of having enough water. You gradually start talking, and they say, 'Yeah, you know, the water is warming, I'm having to go farther north now, into Aroostook, to catch my fish.' So you're sort of getting on that path. And then you can begin talking about efforts that you're making locally."

For all of its basis in science, the term "climate change" — and "science," for that matter — has become weaponized in the tribal warfare of American politics. Some speakers at the conference in Augusta commented that outright climate change denial isn't as prevalent as it was five years ago, but if the subject is approached head-on, it can mark the speaker, however well intentioned, as part of the opposing team.

But the problems that arise from climate change hit a wider audience. Dennis Lajoie, town manager for Norway, Maine — "It's a small town in western Maine; we don't have coastal flooding; population of 5,000; like most small towns in Maine, progressive and conservative at the same time" — recalled efforts to prepare for microbursts and other real conditions that were damaging town infrastructure. "I don't usually mention climate change," he said, "because wherever you happen to be on the [ideological] scale, the storms hit, roads flush out, and what we really need is deeper ditches and bigger culverts. They're practical solutions to a problem, however you want to see it."

Kittery has similarly attempted an apolitical, hands-on approach. Town Manager Kendra Amaral described hanging maps of the town in the community center with a request that residents place a pin where they live, where loved ones live, and where they like to spend time. The goal was to show how personally important areas overlap, and how some of them may be overcome by the rising ocean if forecasts are correct.

"The map filled up with pins, and people started to make that connection that, oh, this is real. This is going to impact us." If the community didn't do something about it, she said, they realized they might not be able to get to a local landmark or a friend's home, or more: "I might not be able to pass down my home to my children, or them to their children, if I don't do something about this."

The town added a question to its capital planning process: Is this asset impacted by climate change/sea-level rise? It was a small step, but had a direct financial effect when the town's bond rating came under review in 2021.

"The bonding agencies told us, we're going to look at your

climate resiliency and your climate adaptation efforts, and we are going to rate you based on whether or not you acknowledge this, and you're planning for it. And they made it very clear that we could actually reduce our rating if we were not serious about it."

She urged other town officials to borrow ideas and work cooperatively. In government, she said, "there's no such thing as plagiarism."

Fernow, of Dover-Foxcroft, noted that in Piscataquis County, where people are used to being independent and solving their own problems, any whiff of government involvement can be a conversation ender.

"But if you talk about being a self-sufficient community, or growing our own food, and making it possible for farmers to make an adequate living in farming, people get that," she said, "because historically their parents were farmers, their grandparents were farmers, and they want to make a living. So they know all about that already. You can tap into that and then you get their buy-in for that portion of what you're doing."

When Brenda Harrington, adult programming librarian at the Belfast Free Library, started the grant-funded climate change program, All of Belfast: Climate Dialogues, in 2020, she saw two major challenges: the first was attracting "more than just the so-called choir to the conversation" — having almost immediately gone virtual during the pandemic the jury is still out on that one: "You think you are, but how do you gauge that?" The second challenge was overcoming the feelings of helplessness and despair among people who understand the gravity of climate change.



An electric vehicle charging station in Belfast

PHOTO: ETHAN ANDREWS

Harrington organized art exhibitions and hosted presentations of Belfast Climate Committee and talks by policy experts, scientists, and local farmers who recounted their experiences with changes in seasonal temperatures and the increasing frequency of severe weather events. She concluded that "cooperation is the antidote to despair."

Amara Ifeji, director of youth engagement and policy with the Maine Environmental Education Association, described how relying on science to make the case for action on climate change can exclude a large contingent of people who would otherwise pitch in.

"In high school, I was seeing graphs of the CO2 trends over time and I'm like, why am I looking at this?" the 20-year-old Ifeji said. "This doesn't make any sense to me. It's not what compels me." It was only when she attended a gathering for youth environmental organizers and heard stories from people doing climate organizing that it made sense.

She noticed in Maine that the climate organizing movement hadn't put much focus on environmental and climate change education. "There's environmental work, and then there's education work, and environmental education kind of falls in this weird gray area."

In response, she worked on LD 1902, which established the Climate Education Professional Development Pilot Program within the Maine Department of Education. The three-year pilot was funded at \$2.1 million.

Outside the Augusta Civic Center, I asked Rockland City Councilor Nate Davis about reaching people who aren't interested in talking about climate change. (Davis co-authors the column Notes from Lime City in The Free Press.)

"I think that the biggest low-hanging fruit, at least in Maine, that municipalities can do is weatherization and efficiency," he said. "Politics usually isn't an obstacle, simply because you can make an argument from purely an economic perspective of saving money if you want or if you need to. At the same time, I don't think it makes sense to shy away from political concerns or from environmental concerns. I think it's just important when you do [approach it from that angle] to be honest and authentic and respectful. But don't pretend that [climate change] is not part of your thinking or part of your attitude."