



San Mateo Look Ahead Climate Opinion Research Summary¹

The Look Ahead campaign led by Climate Access in partnership with San Mateo County, and a range of research and outreach partners, aimed at increasing community members' understanding of sea-level rise risks and at strengthening their involvement in developing plans to prepare for and reduce risks from sea-level rise. Over the project period from September 2017 through early January 2018, it reached more than 3,000 community members and generated significant media attention.

For nearly five months, a virtual reality viewer was installed at Coyote Point, where people could see first-hand what sea-level rise might mean, and what some of the potential responses might look like. The viewer also allowed participants to share their concerns and support for solutions via polling questions woven into the virtual reality experience. Hosted sessions were held at the site as well as focus groups aimed at further understanding the opinions of county and municipal staff, elected officials, and community members, and barriers to and opportunities for action.

Dr. Susanne Moser of Susanne Moser Research and Consulting, with support from Christa Daniels of Antioch University, designed and carried out the research component of the project, aimed at helping San Mateo County improve its outreach and engagement efforts around flooding risks and responses. Key findings and implications are outlined below.



¹This summary is based on an extensive research summary provided to San Mateo County. Moser, S.C. and C. Daniels (2017). Look Ahead San Mateo: Results from Visualization Research Conducted for San Mateo County. Results prepared for San Mateo County. Santa Cruz, CA: Susanne Moser Research & Consulting.



Research Background

- 3,100 survey participants experienced the VR viewer at Coyote Point between September 2016 and January 2017
- 3 hosted sessions were held in October/November/December 2016
- 6 focus groups (with municipal/county staff, decision-makers, and community members volunteering as “Conversation Starters”) were held in October 2017

Key Findings

- A majority of participants are already highly concerned about current flood risks.
- There is strong support for immediate action, particularly from those most concerned.
- When people are very concerned, they are willing to engage at higher levels in the adaptation process.
- There is an interest in having access to more information and updates on the adaptation planning process.
- Nearly one quarter of those asked would attend a community meeting or want to know how they can play an active role in their communities when it comes to preparing for a climate change future.
- Focus group participants were very positive about the County of San Mateo’s Sustainability Office and Supervisor Pine, and saw the Look Ahead project as evidence of San Mateo’s commitment to community engagement.

Research Implications

- The research revealed a mandate for action given high levels of concern, readiness to engage, and the realization that adaptive action is needed.
- Climate visuals are best when based on realism, immediacy, personal relevance, human experience, and show the consequences of action.
- Concern is high yet remains latent but is ready to be tapped through greater engagement efforts.
- There is a need to raise people’s sense of urgency and convince them that they can take effective actions to safeguard themselves and the community (i.e., increase their sense of efficacy).
- Even highly engaged community volunteers, government staff and elected officials lack a sense of efficacy and responsibility to take necessary action.
- Those most concerned and willing to take action need specific and doable ways to actively engage.
- There is excitement about nature-based solutions, yet the pathway to implementation needs to be clear.
- Elected officials need greater public pressure to act on the mandate for action.



Recommendations

- The County should provide strong, top-level leadership to create a sense of possibility, urgency and responsibility for the future.
- Provide community members with specific risk and solution information, updates on adaptation planning and what they can do specifically to support the process.
- Expand opportunities to directly engage the public as it is particularly powerful in increasing interest and the desire to actively engage.
- Provide specific and doable ways to participate for key internal (e.g., County staff and elected officials) and external stakeholders (e.g., community members).
- Because visual communication has proven effective – particularly for low-concern audiences – in increasing risk perception, the sense of urgency and efficacy in ways that prompt engagement, County leaders and staff should increase their use of powerful visuals to engage the community.

