Speaker Information for 5th Annual Sustainable & Resilient Communities Workshop

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Opening Remarks

Sylvain DeGuise, Connecticut Sea Grant

Sylvain De Guise has been Director of Connecticut Sea Grant since 2005 and professor in the Department of Pathobiology and Veterinary Science at the University of Connecticut since 1998. He is co-chair of the Sustainable and Resilient Communities Work Group of the Long Island Sound Partnership.

Nicole (Nikki) Tachiki, Long Island Sound Partnership

Nikki Tachiki was named Director of the Long Island Sound Partnership in August 2026 and leads the EPA's work with federal, state, and local partners to restore and protect Long Island Sound. Nikki received a bachelor's degree in environmental science from UCLA and a master's degree in environmental science and policy from Johns Hopkins University.

Keynote Speaker

Robert Pirani, NY-NJ Harbor & Estuary Program

Presentation Title: *Cultivating Community Partnerships for Resilient Estuaries*



Robert Pirani is the Director of the New York-New Jersey Harbor & Estuary Program (HEP) and Senior Director for Engagement and Policy at the Hudson River Foundation. Prior to joining the Foundation in 2014, Robert was Vice President for Energy and Environment at Regional Plan Association and Executive Director of the Governors Island Alliance. While at RPA, he worked with HUD and others to undertake Rebuild by Design, a special initiative of the President's Hurricane Sandy Task Force. Robert holds a Masters Degree in Regional Planning from Cornell University.

Panel Discussion: Advancing Watershed & Regional Planning

Moderator: Rebecca Shuford, New York Sea Grant

Rebecca (Becky) Shuford, Ph.D., Director of the NY Sea Grant program since 2019, is a New York native, originally from Brooklyn, and has a life-long history with and love for NY's coastal ecosystems and communities. Becky is co-chair of the Sustainable and Resilient Communities Work Group of the Long Island Sound Partnership.

Panelists:

George Hoffman, Setauket Harbor Task Force



George is a founding member of the Setauket Harbor Task Force (SHTF), a local volunteer citizen science organization that advocates for clean water and healthy harbor environments in Port Jefferson and Setauket Harbors and the Long Island Sound. He is a career professional in government, communications, and legislative affairs with over 30 years of experience in setting and managing policy agendas for federal, state, and local government on Long Island. His expertise is in policy management and in developing strategies for communicating government policy to the public. George served as Chief of Staff to three of Long Island's prominent town supervisors, and was a key member of the Town of Brookhaven's environmental policy team that was successful in passing a $100 million environmental bond referendum - at that time the largest open space protection bond initiative in the United States. He has been a member of the LIS Partnership Citizen Advisory Committee since 2015 and staff coordinator for SHTF's partnership with Save the Sound's Unified Water STudy since 2018.

Daniel Ranells, Bronx River Alliance



Daniel Ranells is Deputy Director of the Bronx River Alliance. The Alliance works in close partnership with New York City Parks as well as dozens of community-based partners, regional nonprofits, businesses, and all levels of government to protect, improve, and restore the Bronx River.

Sharon Torres, Village of Mamaroneck & Long Island Sound Watershed Intermunicipal Council



Sharon Torres serves as Mayor of the Village of Mamaroneck in Westchester County, NY, a community that has experienced significant flooding and continues to face the challenges of protecting residents, businesses, and infrastructure from increasingly severe storms. Elected Mayor in 2023, Sharon has made flood mitigation a top priority, working collaboratively with federal, state, county, and local agencies to advance long-term solutions. She is particularly committed to strengthening intergovernmental partnerships, securing funding, and ensuring that flood mitigation planning incorporates the voices of those most directly affected. She serves as the Executive Committee Chair of the Long Island Sound Watershed Intermunicipal Council (LISWIC) - a coalition of 14 Westchester municipalities committed to advancing watershed protection, flood mitigation, and regional resilience. In addition to her public service, Sharon has extensive executive leadership experience in human resources and organizational management. She holds an MBA and is pursuing a Master of Public Administration at SUNY Brockport. She lives in the Village of Mamaroneck with her two dogs, Mischief and Gracie.

Kathie Hebert, West River Watershed Association



Kathie Hebert has been a West Haven resident for 24 years. Kathie is a retired RN and has worked in various healthcare settings. After SuperStorm Sandy in 2012, she became involved in the Watershed Restoration Committee which evolved into the Sandy Point Neighborhood Association. She joined the West Haven Watershed Coalition in 2014, and serves on the Steering committee. Kathie has spent many hours volunteering: doing beach and trail cleanups, planting native gardens, advocating for funds and local governmental participation in maintenance of the park areas and recently established a new West River Greenway trail in West Haven. This trail connects the New Haven area of West River Memorial Park to the East Coast Greenway at Sandy Point Bird Sanctuary in West Haven. She is also a member of the Land Trust of West Haven.

Denise Savageau, Connecticut Association of Conservation Districts



Denise Savageau has worked in the environmental field for over 40 years including 20 years as Conservation Director for the Town of Greenwich until her retirement in 2018. During her tenure in Greenwich, she worked on water supply protection, watershed management, habitat restoration, open space management, and climate change mitigation and adaptation. She assisted with the development and implementation of the Hazard Mitigation Plan, FEMA grants, and provided staff support to the Emergency Operations Center during major storm events including Superstorm Sandy. She previously worked for the Hartford County Soil and Water Conservation District, providing technical assistance on soil and water conservation to the 29 towns in the county, including conducting flood audits in neighborhoods along the CT River and assisting with USDA funded Watershed Operations Projects and Emergency Watershed Projects. Denise is a member of the Long Island Sound Study Citizens Advisory Committee and the Clean Water Healthy Watersheds workgroup. Her current work is focused on nature as the natural solution to the climate change and biodiversity crises. She is a graduate of the University of Connecticut and holds a B.S. in Agricultural Economics with a concentration in Environmental Economics and Natural Resource Management.

Concurrent Session 1: Municipal and Community Resilience Plans

Speakers:

Robert Steele, L.K. McLean Associates



Robert Steele, PE is President and CEO of L.K. McLean Associates, P.C. (LKMA), with more than 30 years of experience in civil engineering, specializing in stormwater drainage, flood mitigation, and coastal and marine engineering. He has extensive experience evaluating complex drainage systems and developing innovative solutions to flooding in coastal communities throughout Long Island. His drainage expertise includes stormwater modeling, flood inundation mapping, drainage system improvements, tide gates, culverts, outfalls, stormwater treatment, and flood mitigation design. His coastal and marine engineering experience includes the design and rehabilitation of bulkheads, marinas, ferry

terminals, piers, docks, breakwaters, shoreline stabilization systems, and dredging projects. He has managed numerous municipal waterfront improvement projects, integrating structural improvements with erosion control, stormwater management, environmental permitting, and coastal resilience considerations. Robert holds a Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering from Villanova University and is a licensed Professional Engineer in New York and Connecticut.

Keith Masseria, L.K. McLean Associates



Keith Masseria, PE is a Vice President and Project Manager with LKMA and has more than 15 years of experience in civil, coastal, and water resources engineering. His expertise includes flood resiliency, shoreline stabilization, drainage and stormwater improvements, culvert and fish passage design, bulkhead design, marine infrastructure, and construction inspection. Throughout his career, Keith has managed and designed a wide variety of public and private infrastructure projects throughout Long Island and the New York metropolitan area. He has successfully delivered complex projects involving stormwater management, coastal protection, transportation infrastructure, and waterfront improvements, helping communities enhance resilience and maintain critical public assets. Keith earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Civil Engineering from the University of Vermont and is a licensed Professional Engineer in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. He has been recognized by ASCE as the 2016 Young Engineer of the Year and is committed to developing practical, sustainable solutions that address flooding, erosion, and other environmental challenges.

Vanessa Liles, PT Partners



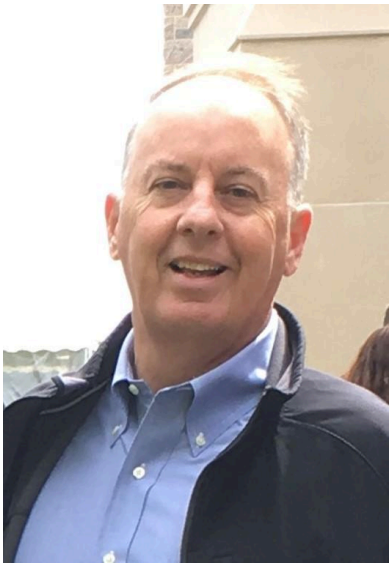
Driven by a lifelong reverence for her mentors, Vanessa Monique Liles, Ph.D., is a scholar and proud community organizer in Bridgeport, CT. For over 20 years, she has worked with youth and communities, building on an academic foundation that includes a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from Texas A&M University, where she was a 2014 Graduate Diversity Fellow. Her research on education policy, communities, and multicultural education directly informs her activism. As an activist researcher, Vanessa works with PT Partners—a grassroots organizing initiative for low-income public housing residents. Her work focuses on racial equity and justice, providing education, co-designing solutions, and strategic planning to dismantle oppressive systems in health, education, and housing.

Brian Shea, City of Rye



Brian is the Manager of the City of Rye in Westchester, NY. He previously served as the Chief of City Operations for the City of Albany, and earlier in his career, served as the Upstate Director of Intergovernmental Affairs for the New York State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services. Brian received his undergraduate degree from Binghamton University and his Masters of Public Administration from Marist College.

Peter Gillespie, Town of Westbrook



Peter has been a practicing Planner in Connecticut since 1986 and has worked as the Planning Coordinator for the Town of Marlborough, then as the City Planner with the City of New London and most recently as the Director of Planning and Economic Development for the Town of Wethersfield, Connecticut. Peter received his (AICP) American Institute of Certified Planners certification from the American Planning Association in 2001. He has led a wide range of planning studies and implementation projects over his career and was the project manager for the Westbrook/Old Saybrook/Clinton/Fenwick – Four Shore Coastal Resiliency Plan. His planning and community engagement work was recognized by the Connecticut Chapter of the American Planning Association with the Public Sector Award for the Planning and Design Process for the City of New London's Downtown Waterfront Park project. Peter was also recognized by the Connecticut Federation of Planning and Zoning Agencies with their Lifetime Achievement Award. Peter has a B.A. from Ohio Wesleyan University and an M.A. from the State University of New York at Albany.

Concurrent Session 2: Nature-Based Restoration Case Studies

Chris Haight, NYC Department of Parks & Recreation



Chris Haight is the Deputy Director of Wetlands Management in NYC Parks Division of Activation, Environment, & Planning. Chris has over 15 years of research and management experience focused on tidal wetlands in NYC and Massachusetts. Chris holds a Bachelor's degree in Environmental Studies from Connecticut College and a Master's degree in Conservation Biology from Columbia University.

Christine Siller, Executive Director, Friends of Rye Nature Center



Christine Siller has served as Executive Director of Friends of Rye Nature Center (FRNC) since 2009, leading the nonprofit organization's efforts to advance environmental education, conservation, and community access to nature. Under her leadership, FRNC has significantly expanded its educational programming, strengthened community partnerships, and advanced the stewardship of the City of Rye's 47-acre nature preserve, which welcomes thousands of visitors each year. Christine has been instrumental in advancing initiatives that address environmental challenges, including flooding, habitat degradation, and increasingly extreme weather events. Her leadership has helped guide investments in ecological restoration, sustainable infrastructure, and expanded educational opportunities, while ensuring that the Nature Center remains an accessible resource for the broader community. Her work brings together nonprofit leadership, municipal partnerships, environmental professionals, and public and private funding to translate ambitious conservation goals into actionable projects. Christine is committed to fostering community collaboration and creating meaningful opportunities for people of all ages and backgrounds to connect with and protect the natural world. Her leadership reflects a belief that environmental stewardship, education, and community resilience are deeply interconnected.

Steven Forte, Friends of Rye Nature Center



Steven is the Director of Conservation and Land Stewardship at Friends of Rye Nature Center, where he leads our Conservation Team's mission of conserving their 47-acre forest while encouraging stewardship in the community. Steven has had an adventurous career thus far. He started out getting a Bachelor's in Engineering before dropping everything to start a career in Ecological Restoration. He moved to upstate New York where he worked as a Restoration Technician before landing a job with NYC Parks. He worked with NYC Parks for almost 5 years, having roles such as Street Tree Planting Project Manager, Forest Restoration Project Manager, and as Conservation Crew Manager. On the side he helps plant Miyawaki Pocket Forests in New York City, trying to re-wild as much grass lawns and concrete as he can. He holds a Master's in Natural Resource Stewardship from Colorado State University.

Mary Ellen Lemay, Aspetuck Land Trust



Mary Ellen (Mel) Lemay is Conservation Director at Aspetuck Land Trust, where she develops green infrastructure projects that connect healthy landscapes with healthy communities. In Bridgeport, she has spearheaded Buffers for Bridgeport and Miyawaki microforests, bringing native plants, biodiversity, and community participation to schoolyards, parks, and waterfront Spaces. Her work transforms the way people see and care for urban landscapes—from planting native buffers that help protect waterways to creating dense, layered forests that provide wildlife habitat and strengthen climate resilience. Through partnerships with schools, community organizations, researchers, and municipal leaders, she brings residents into the work of restoring nature where they live. Mel brings more than 20 years of conservation experience, a background in corporate biotechnology, a biology degree from Fairfield University, an MBA from Fordham University, and a master's in environmental management from Yale School of the Environment. She believes that every planting can be an invitation: to reconnect with nature, care for a shared place, and imagine a healthier future for the community.

Chadwick Schroeder, City of Bridgeport



Chadwick Schroeder runs the Sustainability Office for the City of Bridgeport. Chadwick has led the Sustainability Office for almost 5 years, focusing on a holistic approach to sustainability. As Sustainability Manager, he directs and supports projects and initiatives related to energy, urban canopy, urban agriculture, resiliency, and conservation. Chadwick enjoys playing hockey and planting native perennials, shrubs, and trees in his free time.

Concurrent Session 3: Supporting Meaningful Community Participation

Speakers:

Victoria O'Neill, Audubon CT/NY, National Audubon Society

Presentation Title: *Engaging Communities in Coastal Restoration Projects Across CT & NY*



Victoria O'Neill is the Director of Coastal Resilience for the National Audubon Society's CT/NY program. Vicky leads Audubon's efforts to help coastal areas deal with sea level rise while conserving and restoring natural habitats that support priority birds and benefit coastal communities. She has been working in the fields of habitat restoration, land conservation, and environmental education and outreach in the Connecticut and New York area for over 19 years. Prior to working at Audubon, Vicky worked as a Project Associate at NYC Parks in their Natural Resources Group, the Natural Areas Manager at Randall's Island Park Alliance, and the Long Island Sound Study Habitat Restoration & Stewardship Coordinator for the Long Island Sound Partnership at the NYSDEC/NEIWPCC. She received her BS in Biology from SUNY Geneseo and her MS in Biology from The College of William & Mary

Lisa Noriega, Town of Groton, CT

Presentation title: *Community Champions: Shaping Green Infrastructure Engagement in Groton*



Lisa Noriega is the Sustainability and Resilience Specialist for the Town of Groton, Connecticut, where she helps manage sustainability and climate resilience initiatives with a focus on equitable community engagement. Her work involves collaborating across Town departments and with community partners to advance projects that address environmental challenges and reflect local needs and priorities. Prior to joining the Town of Groton, Lisa spent four years working in Yale University's Office of Sustainability, where she managed sustainability benchmarking and reporting. She also co-chaired the Yale Latino Networking Group, helping foster community and connection among university staff. Lisa holds a Master of Science in Environmental Policy and a Bachelor of Science in Environmental Science and Resource Management.

Facilitators:

- **Deb Visco Abibou, CT Sea Grant**
- **Shahela Begum, Restore America's Estuaries/Long Island Sound Community Impact Fund**
- **Jimena Perez-Viscasillas, NY Sea Grant**
- **Abbie Winter, CT DEEP**

The facilitators of this session are all members of the Community Decision-Making (CDM) Subgroup of the Long Island Sound Partnership's Informed and Engaged Public Work Group. The goal of the CDM Subgroup is to ensure that communities are intentionally and meaningfully included in the decision-making processes that shape LIS Partnership projects, programs, and priorities.

Panel Discussion: Resilience Financing & Funding

Moderator: Sarah Schaefer-Brown, NY Sea Grant

Panelists:

Mbacke Faye, Resilient Cities Catalyst



Mbacke N'Diaye Faye is an Associate Director at Resilient Cities Catalyst (RCC), where she advances community-centered approaches to urban resilience, climate adaptation, and sustainable development. RCC is a global nonprofit that helps communities, cities, and regions build resilience to climate change, disasters, and social inequities. RCC accelerates action and strengthens local capacity to create safer, healthier, and more prosperous places for all. Through RCC's Resilience Neighborhoods Program, she works with local governments, community organizations, and technical experts to develop and implement solutions that help cities and neighborhoods prepare for, withstand, and recover from climate-related challenges. Her work focuses on translating resilience strategies into actionable projects that strengthen communities, protect vulnerable populations, and support long-term economic and environmental sustainability. Previously, she served as Senior Urban Planner at the Newark Downtown District, leading streetscape, public space, and data-driven planning initiatives. Mbacke holds a Master's in Urban and Environmental Planning and Policy from Tufts University and a Bachelor's in Environmental Studies from Suffolk University.

Ashley Stewart Brown, CT Green Bank



Ashley Stewart Brown is Senior Manager of Environmental Infrastructure Outreach at the Connecticut Green Bank. An environmental engineer and planner with nearly two decades of regional experience in environmental infrastructure management, she joined the Green Bank in 2022 to guide its expansion into environmental infrastructure investment. She develops strategy, builds cross-sector partnerships and stakeholder relationships, and connects environmental policy objectives with the Green Bank's financing tools. Through this work, she identifies and advances opportunities that support Connecticut's goals for water infrastructure, land conservation, parks and recreation, waste and recycling, agriculture, and climate resilience. Ashley has also supported the

expansion of two flagship financing programs to help homeowners and commercial businesses strengthen their resilience. She earned a B.S. in civil engineering from Temple University, a master's degree from the Yale School of the Environment, and a graduate certificate in Public Health and Climate Change from the Yale School of Public Health.

Sally Connolly, City Island Oyster Reef



Sally Connolly has lived most of her life on Long Island Sound and is passionate about ensuring its health. She served as the Deputy Director of Community Affairs for the Manhattan District Attorney's Office for 15 years, designing its community outreach initiatives, and developing curricula for young adults. The chair of City Island Oyster Reef, a community-led environmental nonprofit, Ms. Connolly leads the organization composed of environmental advisors, volunteers, staff and interns in deploying oyster reefs in the Sound and offering marine education for Bronx youth. The organization has obtained City, State and Federal funding to construct oyster reefs, run a shell recycling program with local restaurants as well as expand marine education and scientific monitoring. The non-profit has planted pollinator gardens in a living shoreline next to a local school where students learn about how native plants are essential to a healthy ecosystem.

City Island Oyster Reef is becoming a magnet for renowned scientists to study marine ecology while helping the non-profit develop stronger educational programs offered to Bronx youth. In keeping with her commitment to the Bronx, Ms. Connolly serves on the community advisory board of Jacobi Hospital assisting the hospital with the strategic development of neighborhood-based initiatives.

Barbara Zahm, City Island Oyster Reef



Barbara Zahm, PhD received her doctorate in anthropology from the Graduate Faculty of the New School in 1980. For many years she was a documentary film and video producer/director for public television and educational distribution. From 1998 to 2017, Dr. Zahm served as director of product development and grants for It's About Time, Inc. (IAT), a niche publisher and global leader in research-based science, technology, engineering, and mathematics curricula programs for kindergarten through college. She has been a City Island resident for 42 years. Upon retiring from IAT, Dr. Zahm dedicated herself to countering the

environmental issues facing her local community. She was a founding member of City Island Oyster Reef (CIOR) and for the past several years has served on its Board of Directors and as its Treasurer. She was also focused on grant writing and reporting, and subsequently CIOR has successfully been awarded several Federal, State and City grants. Dr. Zahm also joined the Board of the Hutchinson River Restoration Project (HRRP) and serves as its Co-Chair. HRRP is another environmental organization that strives to clean the local waterways in the Western Long Island Sound watershed, specifically the highly polluted Hutchinson River.

James Finch, Branford Climate Resilience Fund



James "Jim" Finch recently retired after serving for 28 years as Finance Director for the Town of Branford. Previously, he served for five years as Director of Management and Budget for the City of Norwalk and worked for six years in the City of New Haven's Controller's Office. A past president of the New England States Government Finance Officers Association (NESGFOA), Jim is also an honorary member of the Connecticut Government Finance Officers Association. He worked extensively with State Senator Christine Cohen to draft Public Act 19-77, "An Act Authorizing Municipal Climate Change and Coastal Resiliency Reserve Funds," which Governor Ned Lamont signed into law on July 1, 2019. Jim currently serves as a board member of Nutmeg State Financial Credit Union. Jim holds a master's degree in public administration from the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public and International Affairs and a Bachelor of Arts in political science from Seton Hall University.

Joseph Lanzafame, City of New London, CT



Joe is the Director of Public Utilities for the City of New London, CT and has 22 years of experience in consulting and public water and wastewater system management. He also manages the City's Stormwater Utility formed in 2018. Joe graduated from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst with a BS in Civil and Environmental Engineering and a MS in Environmental Engineering. He is a registered professional engineer in Massachusetts and Connecticut and has been a member of CTAWWA, AWWA, and WEF for over 20 years. Joe also holds grade 3 certifications in water treatment and distribution in both CT and MA. He is a member of the New England Water Works Association and has served as a Board member since 2025.