

Falmouth “CAN” Brings Sustainability Director Position to Town

By Rosemary Dreger Carey
Falmouth Climate Action Network (FalCAN)

Climate organizing at the local level. That’s the mantra of “CAN” groups, or climate action networks, across Cape Cod and the Islands. In April, members of the Falmouth Climate Action Network (FalCAN), including this writer, acted on that guiding principle by bringing a warrant article to town meeting to create a full-time Sustainability Director position. The new position, which would be focused on climate mitigation and coastal resiliency initiatives, was overwhelmingly approved.

The petition was the collective brainchild of our team after passage of a Climate Emergency declaration at the previous year’s town meeting. Once that resolution had passed, we asked ourselves, “What’s next?” It wasn’t long before we identified the need for a dedicated professional to drive the sustainability agenda through all town decisions.

Our first step was to identify the towns in Massachusetts that had sustainability director or similar positions (there were at least 35!). Next, we reached out to seven of those sustainability directors to inquire about their roles and responsibilities, reporting structure, and what initiatives they have undertaken. We gathered valuable information and found one overarching theme: that having a dedicated sustainability director is a very good investment for the town, leading to better coordination and collaboration between departments, access to expertise and resources, and the ability to secure and implement grants. Many sustainability directors reported they have brought in multiple times their salary in grants and savings to the town.

Guided by that information, we crafted a warrant article that defined the position and gained a commitment from the Select Board to take the necessary steps to ensure it would be created and funded in the next operating budget.

Our next step was to gain the community support we knew would be necessary to create a new full-time position. Again, our team identified key groups and stakeholders, divided the outreach tasks, and personally reached out to organizations and individuals by email and by phone. Our objective was to describe the position, the potential benefits to the town, and ask for their support. In just a few weeks, endorsements came from businesses, the Falmouth Chamber of Commerce, faith groups, and ultimately from the Select Board. Without that widespread support we would not have earned the yes vote at town meeting.

“This is one example of how climate advocates can make positive change in their towns,” said Eleanor Ling, one of the co-petitioners. “Having a sustainability director will

help ensure that Falmouth's stated climate policies and the state's mandate to reach net zero emissions by 2050 are put into action."

Having a sustainability director on staff will also allow Falmouth to secure grants and demonstrate the town has the capacity to implement climate mitigation and coastal resiliency initiatives. Town departments and committees who want to act on climate, but may not have the time, expertise, or clear direction to do so will also gain an ally.

When hired in the next fiscal year, Falmouth's new Sustainability Director will have the strong support of the community. The position may also serve as a model for other Cape Cod towns to create a similar position focused on addressing the climate emergency.

Co-petitioners to the Article 28 Falmouth Spring 2022 Town Meeting were: Mike Fogarty, David Leslie, Eleanor Ling, Susan Richman, GERALYN SCHAD, David Mark Welch, and Rosemary Dreger Carey

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