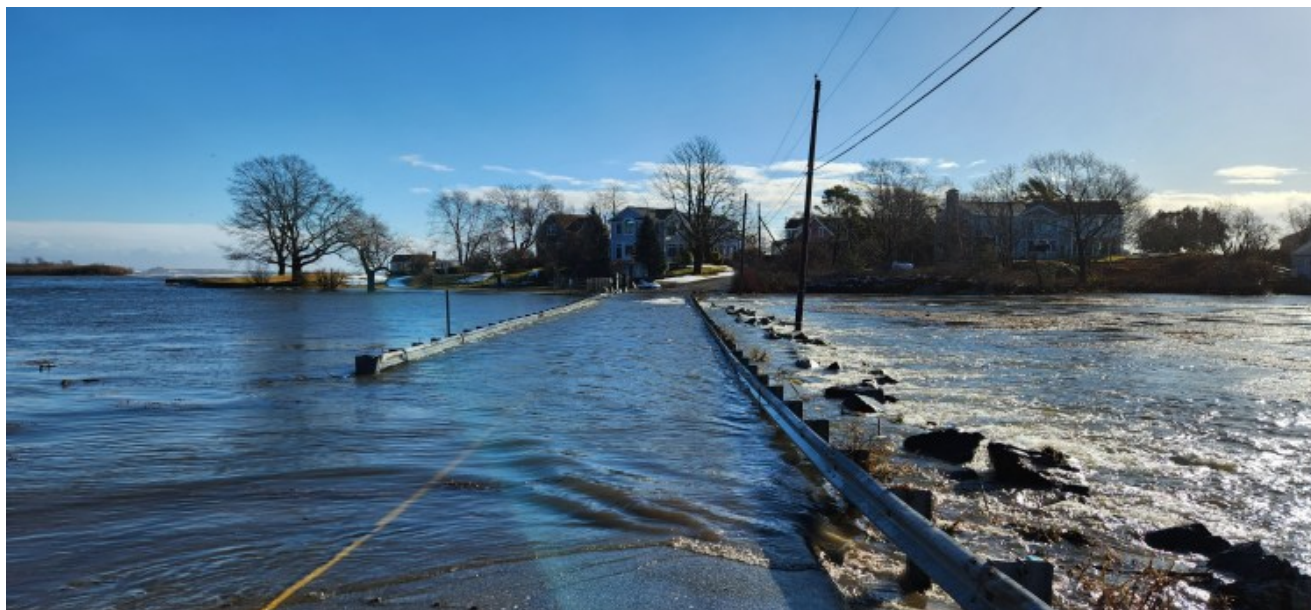


Storm-battered Maine communities look to state funding to prepare for warmer, wetter future

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The flooded Pier Road causeway in Kennebunkport on Jan. 10. *Photo by Frank Orr*

Kennebunkport was awaiting delivery of blocks to finally elevate the low-lying Pier Road causeway when the [January storms](#) hit the Maine coast.

Record-setting high waters caused by the storm surge, the highest monthly tide and decades of climate-driven sea level rise overran Bickford Island's only connection to the mainland twice in one week, cutting off five residential properties, two restaurants and the Cape Porpoise Pier.

"We've never had flooding like that before," Kennebunkport Town Manager Laurie Smith said. "We've been wanting to do something about the causeway for years. It floods during a king tide, never mind a major storm. But it's just the tip of the mountain of what we've got to do to get ready for what's coming."

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Gov. Janet Mills wants to invest \$50 million into a state climate change adaptation fund that is footing the \$2.6 million bill to elevate Kennebunkport's 450-foot causeway by about 4 1/2 feet, which is how much engineers say is needed to remain above [the fast-warming Gulf of Maine](#) for decades to come.

Communities across the state, from Kittery to Fort Kent and from the shoreline to the western mountains, are looking to the government to help them prepare for Maine’s warmer, wetter future, including more frequent and ferocious storms and a fast-warming, continually rising Gulf of Maine.



Gov. Janet Mills wants to put \$50 million into the Maine Infrastructure Adaptation Fund for projects like raising and reconstructing the causeway from Cape Porpoise to Bickford Island in Kennebunkport. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

The Maine Infrastructure Adaptation Fund was created in 2021 to help local communities prepare for climate change, with a special focus on flood prevention. Kennebunkport was one of 18 towns to apply for a first-round grant from the initial \$20 million fund. It received one of a dozen awards handed out.

Mills announced her plan to put another \$50 million into the fund during the part of last week’s State of the State address that focused on damage caused by the recent storms. Mills wants to dip into the state’s rainy day reserve to replenish the infrastructure plan and set aside \$5 million to help communities decide which resiliency projects to tackle first.

“Let’s give them the tools to continue this desperately needed work and let’s turn those plans into real action,” Mills said. “Essentially, I propose taking from the Rainy Day Fund to respond to some pretty rainy days we’ve had and some rainy days ahead.”

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Mills also wants to expand grant eligibility beyond publicly funded infrastructure to include privately owned working waterfronts battered by the Jan. 10 and 13 storms. These waterfronts are integral to the state's fishing, aquaculture, and tourism industries.

Competition for state infrastructure grants is always intense – the state could have easily handed out an extra \$10 million in the first round of funding – but the demand has only increased in the wake of back-to-back-to-back winter storms, said Joyce Taylor, chief engineer for the Department of Transportation.

“The storms were a wake-up call for a lot of people,” Taylor said. “But the need has always been there.”

The demand for these grants also increased as the number of municipalities that have received a state community resiliency partnership grant has grown, Taylor noted. To date, 175 communities have used the planning money to map out local climate vulnerabilities they wanted to fix even before the storms.

Some worry the widespread storm damage might cause a recovery rush that would drive up labor and supply costs and lead to long waits for the consultants, engineers and contractors needed to get roads, buildings, dunes, piers and wharves repaired or replaced before fishing and tourist season arrives.

It's still too early to say if Mills' proposal will survive the state budget process, much less how the \$50 million grant would be disbursed, but it's unlikely that communities or waterfront owners could apply, grants be awarded, contractors be hired and work be completed for this season.

Preparing for climate change

These projects received funding from a \$20 Maine Infrastructure Adaptation Fund created in 2021. Gov. Janet Mills has proposed adding \$50 million to fund more projects.



1. Frenchville - \$58,000 to design new, larger road culverts to handle heavy rains.

2. Anson-Madison - \$842,000 to upgrade old stormwater system to reduce flooding.

3. Winslow - \$2.7 million to replace stormwater structures and prevent flooding during heavy rains.

4. Blue Hill - \$1 million to protect wastewater treatment facility from sea level rise and storm surge.

5. Norway - \$100,000 to assess the vulnerability of stormwater infrastructure.

6. Rockland - \$75,000 to develop plan to eliminate combined sewer overflow during big storms.

7. Bath - \$4 million to upgrade downtown drainage system to prevent flooding.

8. Boothbay Harbor - \$4.2 million to protect wastewater treatment facility from sea level rise and storm surge.

9. Scarborough - \$60,000 for stormwater and culvert replacement to alleviate flooding.

10. Kennebunkport - \$2.5 million to elevate seawall

10. Kennebunkport - \$2.0 million to elevate causeway linking Bickford Island to the mainland.

11. Berwick - \$1.4 million to prevent stormwater flooding and sediment erosion into Salmon Falls River.

12. Ogunquit - \$2.9 million for walls to protect sewage treatment facility from sea level rise.

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The work funded by the original \$20 million grant – mostly replacement of old, undersized stormwater pipes and culverts and protection for low-lying sewer plants – is only just getting started. The grants did not save them from the January storms, but the communities hope it will next time.

Ogunquit's \$2.8 million first-round grant is being used to protect a low-lying coastal sewer facility in danger of being overrun by sea level rise until the town can save the money needed to move the whole plant to higher ground, according to sewer district superintendent Phil Pickering.

The extra three feet of walls built around the tanks should buy the town the time it will need, he said.

Kennebunkport plans to apply for a second grant if Mills' budget is approved with the \$50 million fund allocation intact, Smith said. The town has a backlog of resiliency projects waiting, with at least \$12 million in road work needed to keep 600 residences and businesses from being cut off by tidal surges and floods.

"This funding is needed more than ever," Smith said. "We're just one coastal town. The governor could put four times as much as what she's asking for in there and it would only scratch the surface of what is needed if we want to keep people safe and our working waterfronts productive."

Mills has yet to release a detailed supplemental budget proposal. The plan must be adopted by state lawmakers, who could change it before sending it back to Mills for final approval. But lawmakers from both political parties have said they want to encourage winter storm recovery.

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Proposed bill would help Maine businesses recover from recent storms

Republicans and Democrats co-sponsored an after-deadline bill from Sen. Craig Hickman, D-Winthrop, that would establish a \$50 million program to make emergency relief payments to small businesses hurt by winter storms in December and January. The legislative committee that oversees economic development will hold a Feb. 13 hearing on the bill.

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