https://www.bayjournal.com/news/climate_change/as-climate-projects-elsewhere-falter-maryland-town-forges-ahead/article_e38f4908-839b-40ec-8dba-bb9d105b33ca.html

As climate projects elsewhere falter, Maryland town forges ahead

Jeremy Cox

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The Trump administration has canceled billions of dollars promised to communities across the country to fight climate change. But in a flood-besieged town on Maryland's Eastern Shore, officials have pressed forward unscathed — for now.

Cambridge is still at least a year and a half away from breaking ground, and whether the project receives the $16 million in construction funding pledged to it by the Federal Emergency Management Agency will likely depend on decision-making in the White House at that time. But the project's top architect says he's optimistic that the money will be there when it's needed.

"Hopefully, we'll have the FEMA funding, and, if not all of it, we can find other sources," said Larry White, the engineering consultant overseeing the project for the city. "We're an underserved community, and we probably have the highest risk of any community on the Eastern Shore."

White has remained confident even as a recent update to the design pushed the price tag up to $24 million. The new estimate accounts for the impact of inflation on building materials as well as a last-minute addition to the plan of improvements to the city's aging stormwater system.

Aptly named Water Street in Cambridge, MD, is inundated during an exceptionally high tide in October 2025.

Dave Harp

To close the gap, White said the city will apply early in 2026 for additional grant funding, starting with FEMA. Again, he doesn't

Larry White (left) of the Cambridge Resiliency Project and Mike Sieracki of the University of Maryland walk along the waterfront in Cambridge, MD, which floods often during abnormal high tides

Dave Harp

foresee any significant snags with finding the money.

“We write good proposals,” he said, chuckling.

But the city also has a secret weapon at its disposal: the University of Maryland’s Center for Environmental Science. A team of researchers at the center’s Horn Point Lab, just a few miles from the Cambridge waterfront, has been feeding engineers with fresh research to optimize the project’s design.

“I think that if communities around the country are applying for grants, having a strong university connection and science-based approach makes our grants look different and helps us get funding,” said Michael Sieracki, the lab’s director.

To keep storm surge at bay, the plan calls for constructing a 3- to 4-foot-high levee, or “embankment,” along the Choptank River, raising certain road segments and creating a 1.6-mile living shoreline. To grapple with inland flooding, the project includes nature-based features where excess water can gather.

“It’s a hybrid design,” White said on a recent morning from the city’s wharf as waves lapped the top of the bulkhead. “We’re combining traditional engineering and embankment with a living shoreline. It gives you multiple barriers. In engineering, we call this ‘defense in depth.’”

The embankment will protect the city from storm surges up to 7 feet, White estimates. That’s 2 feet higher than what Tropical Storm Isabel caused in 2003, still the area’s flood of record.

Living shorelines — marshy or vegetated areas built at the water’s edge — use natural materials such as plants, sand, rock and oyster shells. Coastal communities are increasingly embracing this “soft” form of infrastructure to absorb storm-whipped waves. In Cambridge’s case, the living shoreline will provide protection equivalent to an extra foot of flood wall, White said.

He suspects that the city’s funding escaped the Trump administration’s cuts earlier this year because it came from an unusual source.

The city received $18 million — $1.6 million to be spent immediately on design work and $16 million to be held in reserve for construction — from FEMA, stemming from the government's Covid pandemic disaster declaration. (That funding **was allowed** to be spent on a variety of disaster-mitigation projects, not just those directly related to the pandemic.)

Cambridge, with a population of 13,000, has long looked to the water for its livelihood. Its waterfront once teemed with seafood packing houses and shipbuilding operations. But after those industries declined, the community struggled to fill their void. The most glaring example is the 34-acre shore-hugging plot that still sits **mostly empty** despite years of planning and millions of dollars spent trying to transform it into a hotel-anchored magnet for tourists.

In the eyes of many locals, the city's economic rebound depends on fixing its flooding problems. That includes protecting quaint neighborhoods along the waterfront, home to some of area's priciest real estate, they say.

"We've built up a lot," said Patty Kaczmarek, a Cambridge resident since 2006. "People like their waterfront property. If they want to keep it, they need to do something about it now, versus when it's too late."

Cambridge, like much of the Chesapeake Bay region, faces a greater threat from sea level rise than virtually anywhere else in the U.S. That's because, in addition to water levels rising due to atmospheric warming, the ground is slowly sinking due to the post-Ice Age resettling of the Earth's crust.

The flooding continues to worsen. In 2000, Cambridge experienced inundation from high tides **only once**, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. In 2019, it was up to a **record** 19 days. The agency predicts there could be a debilitating 40-150 days of flooding by 2050.

The flooding project has attracted criticism from some residents and city commissioners. Some have balked at the prospect of the embankment blocking views of the river. And others have suggested that the ailing sewage system should be a higher priority.

Houses at the intersection of Water and Mill Streets in Cambridge, MD, endure an abnormally high tide in October 2021.

Dave Harp

Longtime resident Catherine Gaddy questions whether the embankment and living shoreline will really work. “If you put a wall

from there to there, what happens when the water goes around it?" she asked. "It's got to go somewhere."

Gordon Potter, a web developer, became a first-time homeowner five years ago, snapping up a tidy place across the street from the Choptank shoreline. He was happy that day, despite his knowledge that Cambridge lies in the crosshairs of climate change.

"But I was even happier," he added, "when I saw that there was a plan to remedy it."

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