

The RAFT: Reflection and Evaluation Report

June 2023



This project, Task # 91.02 was funded by the Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program led by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality through Grant #NA FY22 #NA22NOS4190187 of the U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, under the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972, as amended.

Summary

The Resilience Adaptation Feasibility Tool (RAFT) was developed to help Virginia localities improve resilience to a range of challenges relating to climate change while striving to be economically and socially viable. These challenges include flooding, storm hazards, heat, and other emerging issues, captured under a broad definition of resilience. While The RAFT Scorecard was originally developed in response to a request from local government representatives to provide support for coastal localities experiencing flooding due to sea level rise and increasingly intense storms, we have responded to changing conditions by expanding The RAFT to apply to all Virginia localities and multiple hazards.

Between 2015 and 2023, The RAFT has worked with 26 localities in Virginia's coastal and riverine regions, tapping the expertise and community integration of regional Planning District Commissions (PDCs). The RAFT process was informed and shaped by a survey of existing sustainability and resilience report cards, as well as interviews with developers and recipients of five of the most popular instruments. Findings from this research led to a comprehensive support process involving: 1) an independent scoring of locality resilience in their planning, policies and programs, and review and ground truthing with the locality; 2) a community workshop where community leaders use this information to develop a set of their highest resilience priorities for the next year, and formation of a community Implementation Team; and 3) one year of implementation support along with regular Implementation Team meetings facilitated by The RAFT team. Over time, as the team sought to increase the diversity of community voices at the community workshop and on the Implementation Team, the process added a qualitative assessment of resilience strengths and opportunities with diverse community stakeholders. Implementation support by The RAFT team has included technical support such as developing complex GIS flooding risk maps; workshops on planning and policy issues regarding transportation, Comprehensive Plans, identifying high risk populations, and business preparedness; community surveys; development of model policy or plan

language; legal analysis of specific issues such as establishing dunes authority; and activating our networks of university colleagues, nonprofit and community organizations, government agencies, and private sector and industry to marshal resources in support of achieving specific community resilience priorities. Through all of these years, The RAFT core team has sought to keep the 18-month process fresh, relevant, and adaptable to the specific needs of each community.

The RAFT Scorecard in its current form assesses five key planning, policy, and program elements of resilience: (1) Policy, Leadership, and Collaboration; (2) Risk Assessment and Emergency Management; (3) Infrastructure Resilience; (4) Planning for Resilience; and (5) Community Engagement, Health, and Well-Being. In addition, consideration of social equity is integrated throughout the Scorecard.¹ The Scorecard was originally created for coastal communities, focusing on flooding and emergency planning for coastal hazards such as hurricanes – a convenient overlap for localities as the Federal Emergency Management Agency began requiring resilience analyses, namely Hazard Mitigation Plans, as a condition of receiving federal disaster preparedness funds. The RAFT Scorecard continues to evolve and remain relevant as it is adapted for emerging resilience issues, such as heat, and for working with federally and state recognized Tribes, which as sovereign nations do not offer outside accessibility to policy and planning documents.

When initially developed, The RAFT represented a novel approach to resilience assessment and education and technical assistance that built connections with localities where there was both a need and a lack of presence from more traditional outreach and support efforts. Eight years later, the landscape has changed significantly due to localities' increasing awareness of and desire to address climate change impacts. While not all localities recognize this need, the number of localities that seek to prioritize resilience planning has increased. Through this time the reputation of The RAFT also has grown, so it has been requested by localities as a valuable support tool for growing locality resilience plans and programs – in the Northern Neck Planning District, the Middle Peninsula Planning District, Crater Planning District Commission, and now the George Washington Regional Commission. It is because of this growing awareness of the need for resilience planning and desire for support that The RAFT has continued to grow and adapt.

The resilience assessment, education, and support space has transformed in Virginia since 2015, a change that The RAFT arguably helped foster along with numerous others on the forefront of resilience planning. Now there are many organizations, agencies, and private consultants offering resilience and hazard mitigation planning services to localities that seek such assistance. This competition creates an opportunity for The RAFT to continue to deliver on its strengths, which is a detailed, grassroots understanding of how local Virginia communities operate — who the constituents are, how their needs

¹ The relevance of The RAFT Scorecard approach and inclusion of social equity was confirmed through a Hazard Mitigation Plan policy update in 2022 requiring consideration of social equity and inclusion of community representatives in the planning process. *See, e.g.*, Katherine Bagley, “FEMA to States: No Climate Planning, No Money”, *Inside Climate News*, March 18, 2015, <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/18032015/fema-states-no-climate-planning-no-money/>; “Starting next year, the agency will approve disaster preparedness funds only for states whose governors approve hazard mitigation plans that address climate change.” *See also* “State and Local Mitigation Planning Policy Guides: Summary of Changes”, April 2022, https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_mitigation-policies-summary-changes_042022.pdf; “Requires that state plans consider equity and climate change impacts... [and] [d]efines who local governments must include in the planning process. This includes representatives from a broad range of sectors, community lifelines, the public and community-based organizations that support underserved communities.”

are expressed and met, which community voices may need amplification under an equity framework — essentially, a conceptual map of how a community works to achieve change in priority areas. As such, The RAFT can provide state agencies with excellent insights to help the Commonwealth increase resilience. The RAFT also has a second strength of connecting a diverse set of representatives from across the community to generate truly community-wide discussions of resilience, providing them with a common understanding of their risks that can then be used to develop resilience priorities, and catalyzing community organizations and agencies to integrate resilience planning into the services they provide. A third strength is that The RAFT team can draw on a largely untapped network of university faculty and students to support community resilience goals, such as developing green infrastructure plans, mapping, comprehensive plan review and language development, and more.

Continuing to capitalize on strengths is an important way The RAFT can continue to be a leading form of “boots on the ground” technical assistance for Virginia communities working to improve climate resilience, and helping to identify and coordinate opportunities with partners growing the field can help manage costs and team capacity.

History and Growth of The RAFT

In developing The RAFT in 2015, the core team surveyed existing resilience and sustainability scorecards and report cards, analyzing their metrics and approaches for scoring. Using this information, a 20+ member advisory committee, drawn from multiple disciplines and Virginia universities, advised The RAFT core team on the development of a whole-community resilience scorecard as well as the development of the larger three-part RAFT process.

Over the next two years (2016-2017), The RAFT core team worked to refine the Scorecard with the advisory committee, as well as with a focus group of coastal locality experts and another focus group of experts in social equity. The core team tested the Scorecard and the full three-part RAFT process with **three pilot localities** — a city (Portsmouth), a county (Gloucester), and a town (Cape Charles), each located in a different part of the Virginia coastal zone and each with very different needs and cultures. Pilot communities were selected pursuant to several criteria, including a willingness and capacity to participate, demographic diversity, diversity in municipality type, density, size, varying stages in comprehensive planning, and physical vulnerability to coastal flooding. Following completion of the year-long process, and a phase of assessment and further refinement of the Scorecard and process, The RAFT moved into its next phase of implementation.

Following the completion of the three pilots, The RAFT core team held a focus group of seven social equity experts from local government services, state agencies, and academia to identify issues and concerns relating to social equity in climate change. The expert panel focused on integration of social equity metrics throughout The RAFT Scorecard, as well as an emphasis on identifying populations experiencing different kinds of risk, establishing networks of communication, and working with trusted messengers. Additionally, a special evaluation focus group was held with representatives from the three pilot localities as well as representatives of their Planning Districts. Detailed feedback on the Scorecard and the overall process led to further refinement of the Scorecard as well as a decision that, going forward, locality Implementation Teams would be more formally established to help co-create the one-year Resilience Action Checklists and support implementation of the Checklist through the year.

In 2018-19, at the unanimous invitation of the Accomack-Northampton Planning District Commission (A-NPDC), The RAFT core team initiated a regional approach on Virginia's Eastern Shore. *Seven localities* identified by the A-NPDC were invited to work with The RAFT: the counties of Accomack and Northampton, and the towns of Chincoteague, Onancock, Saxis, Tangier, and Wachapreague. The regional "landscape" approach was intended to maintain the community-led focus for development and implementation of each locality's Resilience Action Checklist, while also enabling the localities to discuss shared goals and needs that might be addressed together across a larger landscape, to learn from each other, and to avoid duplication of effort. The regional approach employs a collective impact approach in which the resources of The RAFT core team, together with the planning district commission's insights and local community resources and knowledge, combine to create a larger impact for the region than would be possible if each locality worked alone.

In October 2019, The RAFT was launched in the Northern Neck with the goal of leveraging the regional approach successfully used with communities on the Eastern Shore in a new geographic region of Virginia. In partnership with the Northern Neck Planning District Commission (NNPDC), the three-university core team worked with *eight localities*, four counties and four towns: Lancaster County, Northumberland County, Richmond County, Westmoreland County and the towns of Colonial Beach, Kilmarnock, White Stone, and Warsaw. Due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on community engagement, however, The RAFT core team adapted its process and shifted from its usual in-person regional workshop to a series of three online focus groups with emergency managers, social services agencies, and law enforcement/public safety followed by a regional online Resilience Action Workshop where participants worked in small locality breakout groups to develop resilience priorities for their locality. The RAFT team supported these eight localities in implementing each of their individual Resilience Action Checklists through Summer 2021.

The subsequent RAFT process with the Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission (MPPDC) ran from 2021 to 2023, with the implementation phase running from March 2022 to February 2023. The Middle Peninsula cohort involved *six localities*, five counties and one town including King William, King and Queen, Middlesex, West Point, Essex, and Mathews. This region benefited from an innovative addition to The RAFT process— coupling the quantitative Scorecard assessment with a qualitative assessment consisting of focus groups and individual interviews with leaders of community service agencies and nonprofit organizations to identify a broader range of community resilience strengths and needs. This addition emerged from The RAFT's time working in the Northern Neck, when the Institute for Engagement & Negotiation (IEN) at UVA, one of the founding and core partners of The RAFT team, conducted a concurrent study on the impacts of COVID-19 on the delivery of service delivery and discovered through focus groups and thought leader interviews that community and nonprofit agencies are eager to be engaged in resilience planning. It also led to a realization that the use of these engagement methods could bring these organizations to the table far earlier in The RAFT process, which would be beneficial for a whole-community approach to resilience.

From the beginning, throughout all of these regions, The RAFT process has involved coordination and communication with the localities. Prior to initiating the scoring, The RAFT team makes a formal presentation to the locally elected Boards and Councils, sharing with them the process and expectations, and enabling them to ask questions, identify priorities, and suggest participants, and, finally, requesting them to send a representative to the implementation process. During the quantitative Scorecard phase, the core team stays in close communication with locality staff to ensure that the resilience Scorecard

assessment is both accurate and comprehensive. A final ground truthing occurs when the core team meets with locality staff to review Scorecard findings. This phase concludes with a formal presentation of findings to the elected Board or Council. Significant challenges during this phase include different levels of interest among elected government decision-makers, as well as difficulty in connecting with small localities particularly with localities that either had no staff and/or only volunteer staffing.

Three significant additional developments in The RAFT process emerged from the needs of the community participants and state and local government.

1. *Regional Resilience Equity Workshop*: In the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula, in response to needs expressed by community participants in both regions, The RAFT facilitated the development of the first Regional Resilience Equity Workgroup (RREW) in Virginia, intended to serve both the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula. As articulated by RREW members, the purpose of their coalition is to “create a space where groups can collaborate and share information on resilience for the underserved and vulnerable, for the specific purpose of identifying and resolving gaps.” Since the planning committee developed a plan in fall of 2022 and launched the Workgroup in January of 2023, the 20-member workgroup has developed six small work teams that are focusing on issues of affordable housing and shelters, transit, food security, economic development and living wages, health and mental well-being, and programs for youth and families.
2. *PREP Tool*: In late fall 2021, the Special Assistant to the Governor for Coastal Adaptation and Protection (SAGCAP) approached The RAFT core team to request development a *self-scoring version* of its Scorecard, to enable more localities to use it to develop resilience plans that could enable them to access soon to be released Coastal Flood Preparedness Funding. With guidance from The RAFT faculty at IEN, VCPC, and ODU, an innovative team of graduate and law students undertook and completed this significant effort over spring and summer 2021. This self-scoring tool is free and available from The RAFT website [at this link](#). To date, although great hopes and expectations accompanied the development of the PREP Tool, we are not aware of it being used by any localities. More recently, when The RAFT team asked if a region would be willing to pilot use of the PREP self-scoring tool, with guidance and support from The RAFT team, the response was a strong “no, we want the full RAFT because we don’t have the staff or resources to do this on our own.” The PREP Tool represents an untapped opportunity that might be further pursued by The RAFT.
3. *Mini-grants for implementation*: A significant amount of funding (\$150K) was provided by the Jessie Ball duPont Fund to support resilience implementation in the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula. This was a remarkable development that greatly advanced one of the core goals of The RAFT – to catalyze meaningful local action to increase resilience. Overall, fourteen local organizations, including a local government and Planning District Commission, received funding to address a broad range of resilience issues, from food security and transportation to equipment and training for resilience.

In 2022, The RAFT began working with *two localities* in the Crater region, the Cities of Hopewell and Petersburg, conducting both the quantitative scoring and qualitative assessment. Presentations to local City Councils were held in Fall 2022, and a large joint kickoff community workshop held on February 16, 2023. The decision to focus on two under-resourced cities in that region was made in partnership with the Crater PDC and PlanRVA.

In 2023, VCPC, a co-founder of The RAFT, is being closed by decision of the William & Mary Law School administration. New partners are being explored, including Virginia State University, Virginia Tech, and James Madison University. Virginia Tech's Center for Coastal Studies agreed to join The RAFT core team in June 2023.

For future cohorts, The RAFT core team has discussed [*engaging with Virginia Tribal nations*](#) (up to 11 Tribes), the George Washington Regional Commission (up to 5 localities), the Rappahannock-Rapidan PDC (up to 13 localities), the Roanoke-Allegheny Regional Commission (localities to be determined), and other upriver PDCs. The core team has also discussed and begun efforts to revise the Scorecard to more appropriately address Tribal nations and riverine/inland, rather than just coastal localities.

In spring 2023, The RAFT process was adapted for application to resilience of Virginia Tribal communities. With funding from the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado Boulder, The RAFT team worked with the Upper Mattaponi Indian Tribe, one of Virginia's seven federally recognized Tribes, and the Mattaponi Indian Tribe and Reservation, one of the four Tribes recognized by the state but not the federal government, to adapt The RAFT process and Scorecard specifically. Preliminary work with the two Tribes identified that The RAFT process is applicable to Tribes, but some sections of the Scorecard needs to be modified to better reflect Tribal culture and structure. A qualitative assessment utilizing interviews with Tribal liaisons and workshops with Tribal members was utilized exclusively, rather than reliance on policy review and interviews typically used in The RAFT assessment, because Tribal policies are not a matter of public record. Based on findings of the interviews and workshops, Scorecard elements and language were adjusted. More cultural focus was added to the *Leadership*, *Risk*, *Planning*, and *Community* sections of the Scorecard and language was changed to reflect variations in leadership (i.e. being elected and/or appointed), land utilization, and funding streams, as well as the influence of extreme cold.

Challenges

Growing interest in The RAFT: The RAFT continues to grow in terms of the interest of localities in accessing this community-led facilitated support process. We have added a qualitative assessment to balance the quantitative Scorecard assessment. This has expanded representation of the community at the kick-off workshop, which in turn has enriched the nature of the community's one-year Resilience Action Checklist. With inclusion of priorities that reflect a broader view of community resilience, more community organizations participate in the Implementation Teams, which in turn leads to more powerful and effective collaborations and creative solutions. The challenge, however, is that this intensifies The RAFT process, requiring more resources of The RAFT team during the assessment phase.

Funding: Another challenge associated with the above is the constant need to seek and maintain funding. So much of The RAFT core team's time is spent on cultivating new sources of funding for the next region. The Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program and the Virginia Environmental Endowment have been two consistent "anchor" funders of The RAFT. While these two reliable funders are extremely important because they provide between 30 to 50% of the funding needed for any given region (which is determined by the number of localities participating in the regional process), additional work is needed to cultivate relationships with other potential funders, primarily private foundations that serve the region in question. If stable, secure funding could be established, much of the team's time could be refocused on supporting the work needed with the communities and networking with university faculty and partners to help the communities achieve their resilience goals.

The need to expand the use of The RAFT to increase the ability of low-resourced communities to create "resilience plans" that meet the criteria for Virginia Community Flood Preparedness Fund (CFPF) funding: The RAFT responded quickly and successfully to a request from the State's SAGCAP to create a self-scoring tool, with the goal of providing a tool that would enable localities to develop resilience plans in order to access CFPF funding. This was launched in September 2021 as the PREP Tool, available for free on The RAFT website. However, despite interest from one city and one county, not one locality to our knowledge has completed the PREP Tool. And, in an effort to pilot the use of the PREP Tool and reduce the workload on The RAFT team, we asked one region if they would be willing to do the self-scoring with guidance and support from the team. The response was a solid, "no, we do not have the resources! This is why we want The RAFT process." This response indicates that the PREP self-scoring tool may not be helpful to those communities most in need of support, but rather may be useful only to those localities with greater resources. Even then, our experience indicates that localities with greater resources, such as Virginia Beach and Norfolk, are likely to already have a clear agenda for building their resilience and likely do not need the PREP Tool. In the end, we have learned that the value of The RAFT is the full 18-month process including an independent assessment, creation of a priority Resilience Action Checklist, and intensive support for implementing the community's priorities. Because The RAFT core team can only work with one region at a time, many low-resourced communities will not benefit from this support in a timely manner. The challenge, then, is how to expand the use of The RAFT process in a timely and effective way so that more low-resourced communities can benefit more quickly.

Potential Opportunities

The RAFT can and should remain a trusted community, PDC, and state partner, bridging the gap between the lived experiences of those at the grassroots level and others that may seek to positively support those experiences to increase community resilience. The following are some potential opportunities for continued strengthening of The RAFT process:

1. **The RAFT needs a consistent, stable source of funding.** This is important, because so much of the core team's time is expended on seeking and managing different sources of funding. Additional funding - particularly a legislative appropriation that does not require extensive reporting nor the significantly increasing university indirect charges - would free up The RAFT team to be significantly more efficient and effective in its work with communities.
2. **The RAFT core team could expand our networking with university, NGO, and agency partners to bring them to the table to support implementation,** including tapping into university classes to provide tools and products such as green infrastructure plans, engineering designs, landscape architecture designs, draft language for community plans, and more. One potential partnership is the new George Mason University Virginia Climate Center, which will address heat impacts. Other university partners that have expressed interest in or are already supporting The RAFT include faculty from Virginia State University, James Madison University, Norfolk State University, and Virginia Commonwealth University.
3. **The RAFT core team would like to share our experience of The RAFT method and lessons learned through publications,** to expand its applicability and adaptability for other regions in the nation.
4. Because of the challenges that under-resourced communities experience in trying to continue on their own the resilience-building work facilitated by The RAFT, **one of our goals could be to facilitate communities' development of a clear roadmap of their five top priorities for continuing to build resilience after The RAFT process has been completed, as well as connecting them with state agencies and other partners that will help them achieve their next set of goals.**
5. **The RAFT core team could use the information and contacts gathered through The RAFT's "boots on the ground" efforts in communities to help them find and/or apply for targeted funding to achieve their resilience goals,** such as increasing green infrastructure or providing greater food security. This could be incorporated into the implementation phase of The RAFT process, or pursued by the community after The RAFT ends. If the Commonwealth decides to create regional resilience liaisons, then The RAFT Team could work with them and funnel information to them about communities' needs, including grant-writing.
6. Based upon the success of the micro- and mini-grants distributed using a grant from the Jessie Ball duPont Fund to support resilience implementation in the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula, **The RAFT core team is interested in expanding that approach to other RAFT communities to catalyze meaningful local resilience actions or projects.**
7. Based on the need of low-resourced communities to access The RAFT more quickly, **one of the longer-term goals of The RAFT core team is to develop a model where local place-based "community builders" are integrated from the beginning into the process and budget,** and these

community builders are trained and supported to facilitate the year-long implementation phase. The RAFT team would continue to conduct the independent resilience assessment and community kick-off workshop, and would guide, support, and monitor the one-year implementation phase. This approach would represent an important advancement in The RAFT process in that it would be building capacity at the local level for ongoing facilitation and coordination of resilience actions while also enabling more communities to participate and benefit from The RAFT process.