

SEEING THE FUTURE: HERE. NOW.US AND THE USE OF VISUALIZATION IN COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT IN MARIN COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

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Climate change and sea-level rise are still psychologically distant risks for many coastal communities, even those where King Tides and occasional flooding give previews of the grave challenges soon to come. This persistent tendency to place climate change impacts into the distant future and other places allows decision-makers and stakeholders to postpone beginning the hard work of adaptation planning and implementation. In Marin County, California, an unusual team of local planners and elected officials, technology experts, social scientists, and engagement professionals came together to break that pattern. Through the use of scientifically accurate visualizations, accessible to thousands of community members in an in situ view finder called an “Owl” and an accompanying website, combined with a survey exploring risk and response perceptions, user observations, and a community dialogue, the team attempted to raise awareness of local sea-level rise risks and response options. The hope was to use this innovative technology to increase active local engagement in community adaptation planning. The paper will report on the multi-tiered approach to project execution, detail some intriguing findings, and offer a critical assessment of the value of visualization in stimulating wider engagement on local adaptation planning.