Transcript | Episode 3 | February 17, 2026

Moving with the Coast: Exploring Relocation in a Changing Climate

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EMMA GILDESGAME: Hi, I'm Emma Gildesgame, host to this week's episode of *Nature is the Solution*. The episode you're about to hear is focused on Winthrop. In the months since we recorded this, the town has made the news for another reason, it's being sued by the Massachusetts Attorney General for being out of compliance with the Commonwealth's MBTA community zoning laws. This means the town is no longer eligible for the state funding it desperately needs to act on climate resilience.

The Winthrop Citizen's Advisory Commission on Climate, which you'll hear from in this episode, voted to suspend its operations until the Town Council takes action to change this. As of this episode's release in February 2026, we're not sure what's going to happen next. There is still many people who are advocating and working towards action to keep people in Winthrop safer from climate impacts; you'll hear from many of them today. Regardless of what happens in this one place, conversations like the one you're about to hear are happening up and down the Massachusetts coast as people wrestle with hard, but essential, conversations about our shared future and coasts. Enjoy the episode.

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JENNIFER JONES: I've been flooded out where I've had to leave my home. I've had problems with the water, heat, everything in the basement being destroyed, having to leave my animals there for a couple of days because I had nowhere to go—I had cats, so I had to leave them there. Um, yeah, it was, it's hard.

JAY FEINSTEIN: That's really scary. I'm just thinking about if I had to leave my dog somewhere and I—

JENNIFER JONES: Yes—

JAY FEINSTEIN: didn't know what was gonna happen. That's just really scary.

JENNIFER JONES: Yeah, I mean, it's hard because I have two children and I have to go to her place. I have to make sure that I can take them somewhere warm so I can't stay there at—in the home, and a lot of places don't take animals in those situations.

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EMMA GILDESGAME: You're listening to *Nature is the Solution*, a podcast from the Nature Conservancy. I'm Emma Gildesgame. It's a show about the surprising ways nature can help solve our biggest climate challenges. Because doom isn't the whole story.

JOHN DAROS: I think we're beyond the denial stuff. I think now we're about, okay, we get it, now what can we do about it?

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EMMA GILDESGAME: Still, some stories start in a tough place, like in Winthrop, Massachusetts, a town near Boston's Logan Airport and surrounded on all sides by Belle Isle Marsh, Boston Harbor and the Atlantic Ocean. This spring our podcast producer, Jay Feinstein, spoke to community members there after a local meeting.

JOHN DAROS: Honestly, I was just distracted by the beauty of living on the beach and the shore drive, so that got most of my attention, but the more time I've spent here, I've also watched the pain of what can happen in a neighborhood and a community that's 90% surrounded by water.

PAUL BASKIN: This town is a particular symbol of the climate because here it is, one of the most vulnerable towns you could imagine, surrounded by the sea and yet, it's a completely car-centric town, and it just shows the difficulty of people understanding the severity and the reality of what they face.

SUZANNE SWOPE: We now face a climate change issue that is obviously very concerning to all of us.

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EMMA GILDESGAME: When we think about how climate change is impacting us today, the first thing that might come to mind is storms in Florida or maybe wildfires in California, but Winthrop is one of many coastal communities across the country where flooding has intensified over the years. While there haven't been federally recognized disasters here in many years, the flooding is disastrous for the people of Winthrop. In some parts of town, it's not uncommon to have several feet of water flooding a basement after a storm or to need to replace cars due to water damage, and according to Winthrop

Town Counselor Suzanne Swope, people are beginning to recognize that these issues are because of the climate.

JAY FEINSTEIN: Did you know that there would be a flooding issue, that there would be climate issues at the time that you moved in? Or is that something that you discovered over time?

SUZANNE SWOPE: It's funny about climate, when I was a kid in Lake Erie, Lake Erie died—literally died. I did a lot of water skiing and fish were dead all around me when I would fall off the skis. And why did it die? Well, nobody knew. So, now we faced a climate change—we changed our soap; we did, oh, I cannot tell you how many initiatives were taken to try and fix Lake Erie, until they found alewives and they put them in, and they eat—they ate—the algae, and it cleaned up the lake. It was kind of like a miracle kind of thing.

But at the time, it was threatening where we lived, it was threatening the climate, so I never was concerned about that. I always thought we'll be able to deal with this. We will build berms; we will—I went to Amsterdam. I thought if they can fix it, if Venice can fix it, we can certainly fix it. But in both of those instances, those communities had a will to fix it. I think that's where we are. Now, many of us may have to move. We are probably on an island, but moving's not the worst thing that ever happened to people.

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EMMA GILDESGAME: So how do we inspire a will to fix it? What would it mean for people to have to leave their homes? And how do we understand living in a world with a changing climate? I'm the climate adaptation director with the Massachusetts chapter of the Nature Conservancy and I wrestle with these questions every day.

JAY FEINSTEIN: How do you like it with the headphones?

EMMA GILDESGAME: It’s kind of easier to focus, somehow.

EMMA GILDESGAME: I sat down with Jay to talk about the part climate adaptation plays in Winthrop's story.

JAY FEINSTEIN: The term climate adaptation might be new to some people listening. Some people maybe haven't heard that term. Is that a new term? Have we been talking about this for a while? How long have we been having conversations about climate adaptation?

EMMA GILDESGAME: So, you could argue that we, as humans, have been having conversations about climate adaptation since the Ice Age. If you talk to indigenous communities across the world, really, they have stories of during the hotter times or during the cooler times—here's what we did, here's how we moved. Because really, human history is about adaptation, but as the pace of human caused climate change has accelerated, it's faster than anything any species on this planet has had to ever deal with. The professional field of climate adaptation has grown, but thinking about how do we adapt to changes in our climate is a really old story.

JAY FEINSTEIN: Where does this fit into the mix of climate work and the work that Nature Conservancy does?

EMMA GILDESGAME: Climate adaptation recognizes that the impacts of climate change are here. We are already facing the impacts of climate change. We can see it in a hundred different ways every day and that for us to continue to adapt as people and as [a] society, to handle and thrive with those impacts of climate change, we need to change how we're interacting with our environment. And so, my work, and many, many of my colleagues at The Nature Conservancy, what we're working on is how do we bring people and nature back together?

How do we bring nature into places where it's not? How do we bring human systems in line with natural and ecological systems, so that rather than constantly battling heat and water and all of these other elements, how do we create a system where we're working together? Where we have cool, livable streets in the summer, where we are safe from winter storms that come through, where the extreme precipitation—those times where all of a sudden the skies open up and drop, you know, a month's worth of water in 20 minutes—that we can make it through and accommodate and live with those systems. And recognize where we need to really make some fundamental changes and where we can make some small tweaks, because we need everything in the climate toolbox.

JAY FEINSTEIN: So, we're talking about Belle Isle Marsh, which is a region that surrounds Winthrop and East Boston and Revere. Could you describe who's living there, who's impacted by coastal flooding?

EMMA GILDESGAME: To answer Jay's question, I invited him to come to Winthrop and see for himself.

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NORM HYATT: Hi, Emma.

EMMA GILDESGAME: How's it going? Good to see you!

ANNA LEARY: Good to see you.

EMMA GILDESGAME: Also, what a perfect day to not be sitting at our computers.

ANNA LEARY: Right?

EMMA GILDESGAME: I find myself in Winthrop quite often through my work with The Nature Conservancy and there's always something incredible to see out here.

EMMA GILDESGAME: So, we are standing here looking out at Belle Isle Marsh. It is a beautiful day. We are looking across the marsh at houses in Revere. There's some gulls swooping around, I can see the Osprey platform, which Friends of Belle Isle Marsh have an osprey cam that I definitely don't watch in the background of my workday while I'm working on things. And we're looking at the largest remaining chunk of salt marsh from the extensive marshes that used to be all over Boston Harbor.

JAY FEINSTEIN: Wow, and I just saw as you were speaking, two different birds fly past, which was incredible.

EMMA GILDESGAME: Yeah, Belle Isle Marsh is home to a number of bird species I can't remember off the top of my head, but it's a lot.

EMMA GILDESGAME: We looked it up later. It's over 200 species.

JAY FEINSTEIN: I just think this is just an incredible view.

NORM HYATT: It is. It's just magnificent and the people of Winthrop appreciate it. You know, we all live—nobody's far from the ocean.

EMMA GILDESGAME: That's Norm Hyatt, co-chair of the Citizens Advisory Commission on Climate in Winthrop. He's a retired psychologist and a conservationist, and his wife's family has lived in Winthrop for over a hundred years.

NORM HYATT: I love being out in nature, so, for me, I get up at sunrise and I'm up every day at five and I'll walk Winthrop Beach and just see the bird life and the sunrise, and it's just a magnificent way to live.

JAY FEINSTEIN: What did this used to be? Was this always marsh?

NORM HYATT: How many years [do] you wanna go back? You going back millions or you going back recently?

JAY FEINSTEIN: I don't know, you tell me.

[laughter]

NORM HYATT: Nobody knows what it was, no. It's a salt marsh and there used to be many of these kinds of marshes. It's connected to East Boston, Belle Isle Marsh, which is one of the last of the salt marshes, I think it's the last of the salt marshes, really, in Boston.

EMMA GILDESGAME: We were also there with Anna Leary, another co-chair of the commission. She showed us the remains of the rusting railroad tracks that once carried trains through Winthrop.

ANNA LEARY: It's fascinating where people thought the water wouldn't go [laughs] and now in high tide it's just—you can see like the iron of the remnants—it's covered over.

JAY FEINSTEIN: It's also a great place to see airplanes.

ANNA LEARY: Yeah [laughs] that too.

JAY FEINSTEIN: Or hear them.

ANNA LEARY: For some reason, I actually find the sound of airplanes kind of soothing.

EMMA GILDESGAME: Winthrop pulls you in with its coastal beauty. People here really love this town—you can feel it in the way they talk about it, the way they choose to stay. Still, it doesn’t take long before you notice the other side of life here; the marks left behind by flooding. Residents don't know when the next flood will come, but they stay prepared.

ANNA LEARY: So, I've seen sandbags at the elevation of maybe the windshield of that car that’s in the driveway. So, they have a garage right there, entrance to kind of a basement area, their front stoop, but that's where the water level goes. It's almost the height of the car.

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EMMA GILDESGAME: What do we do about a place so critical to so many people, but that's also so vulnerable to climate disruption? What does all of this look like on the ground? Back in the studio, I told Jay the origin story of my work in Winthrop.

EMMA GILDESGAME: Several years ago, I was speaking with folks from the towns, from partner organizations, a consultant who was helping us think about how do we protect this community from flooding. How do we do it in ways that also protect the marsh? How do we balance the needs of people and the needs of nature in this space?

And one of the questions that I asked was, we're talking about solutions that will protect to 2070, we're talking about solutions that might only protect until 2050. Are there any conversations happening about helping the people who live here move to safer homes where they're not at risk of flooding, and restoring the land that's left behind to functional marshes to continue protecting the rest of the people who stay in this community?

And the answer back then, just a few years ago, was no, we can't talk about this. People don't wanna move. They don't even wanna talk about the idea of moving. We are staying put. The only thing we would think about is trying to get funding to elevate these homes. We can't talk about this. We can't even bring this up. And so I said, would it be helpful if The Nature Conservancy and the other partners who are here started some of these conversations so that you're not the one raising it? Would it be helpful if we raised it? And they said, yeah, that would be really helpful.

And then, just a year or so after that conversation, our consultant, who'd been working in Belle Isle Marsh for a really long time and had built good relationships with people who live right next to the marsh, started hearing from the neighbors of the marsh: I wanna sell my home 'cause I don't wanna deal with the flooding anymore. I've lost six cars in 10 years and I am sick of it, and I wanna sell my house but I don't feel good selling it to somebody without telling them about the flooding. But, I also know that if I tell them about the flooding, I'm not gonna be able to sell my house. And so, they're in this impossible position and they wanted to know what their options were.

And the reality is right now, there's very, very few options, especially here in 2025 when most of the federal funding that could have provided some support has been eliminated. There's very, very few options. And so, one of the things that we are trying to do through the work that I'm leading with TNC and a whole bunch of incredible partners, is help understand what those options could look like.

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EMMA GILDESGAME: The event where we recorded the interviews at the top of the show was one of the outcomes of this work and these collaborations.

LEIGH MEUNIER: So, good evening everybody. My name is Leigh Meunier, and—that's me—with CREW, Communities Responding to Extreme Weather. So, we just wanna say welcome and just thank you for your presence...

EMMA GILDESGAME: We're hosting a series of community meetings that offer a transparent look at the issue and offer an opportunity for people to connect and have conversations about the future of our coasts and our relationship with the water.

LEIGH MEUNIER: Tonight we're asking for your presence, for your curiosity, and then asking for you to really share a lot of experiences and what—any questions that you might have.

EMMA GILDESGAME: Among other things, this meeting covered what to pack in an emergency bag in case you have to leave.

LEIGH MEUNIER: It's emergency kit making, but the way that we often talk about this is more in terms of what's important to you? What are the materials, what's the material things in your life that you would wanna make sure you have with you if you had to go because of some sort of extreme weather event?

EMMA GILDESGAME: What a buy-out program could look like if there ever was one in Massachusetts.

LEIGH MEUNIER: And then states can fund buyouts. New Jersey has a state program, Louisiana has a state program, Illinois has a state program.

EMMA GILDESGAME: And of course, there was the promise of ice cream after the presentation.

LEIGH MEUNIER: No one wants to be the presenter that stands between [laughter] you and the ice cream, but, okay, here we go.

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EMMA GILDESGAME: Some of what we talked about are short term solutions—like what to do in a sudden emergency. That's part of the work of The Citizens Advisory Commission on Climate. Here's Anna Leary again.

ANNA LEARY: If I don't know where a shelter is, nobody knows where a shelter is. If we, as a commission, cannot point people to the evacuation route, to the emergency plan, I don't think anybody knows where to go.

EMMA GILDESGAME: But the long term solutions are more complicated and require some really hard decisions. How long can people even live in a place where they are constantly battling with their environment? The decision to leave is personal. Here's Town Counselor John DeRoss, who is also on the climate commission.

JOHN DAROS: There's a human component to this where people look at what's happening today, look at what could be coming down the pike, and it's stressful and it is personal.

EMMA GILDESGAME: Jay asked some folks at the event if they would ever consider moving.

JAY FEINSTEIN: Have you ever considered leaving your home or leaving Winthrop?

ATTENDEE 1: You're not the first person to have asked that. Many of my friends [laughs] have asked that.

ATTENDEE 2: I have some high top boots, so when the sea level gets high, I'm just gonna put on my boots and stick around as long as it's reasonable to stick around. It may be fortunate that I am 76 and might not have to move before I depart this planet.

ATTENDEE 3: If they don't take the precautions, if they don't get ahead of it, yeah.

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JAY FEINSTEIN: So, let's back up. Coastal flooding is a problem today. It's a problem here. It's a problem now. What are some of the tools that we can start talking about to address it?

EMMA GILDESGAME: Our typical status quo is defending against floods. It's building a wall and saying, "nature, you go over there, we're gonna keep the people over here and

you're gonna stay apart". And there's places where things like sea walls and levees along rivers are kind of our only option, but they have a ton of drawbacks and so they are an approach, but hardening our shorelines wreaks havoc on coastal ecosystems. It also disconnects people from the coast and so, hardening has its place, but it really should not be the default. And right now it's the default. And there are a lot of ways that we can move away from that default and move into softer, more dynamic solutions that work with nature instead of against nature. And so, the classic one that if we go to the full other extreme, is thinking about protecting floodplains.

So, that's protecting places like Belle Isle Marsh, that store storm water and flood water, that slow down the pace of big waves that are coming off of storms. They help filter water. They provide all of these benefits. And so protecting natural flood plains and avoiding building more things that will be at high risk in the places that water wants to be, is the gold standard.

JAY FEINSTEIN: But the problem is that people live on floodplains.

EMMA GILDESGAME: Yeah, and so, where we have floodplains that we haven't built on yet, protecting them is important. But that's exactly the problem, which is that there are people who've been living in floodplains for centuries now, and so the old model was first defend, build a wall and then accommodate the water.

Say, okay, the wall didn't work, or we can't put a wall here, we're going to maybe move our cars during high tides so they don't get flooded. We're going to elevate our homes so that the water can go underneath them—accommodate the water—we learn to live with the water. And thinking about retreat, thinking about moving out of the way of water, has for a really long time been the last resort. But my colleagues at The Nature Conservancy in 2023 put out the flood adaptation hierarchy, which really flips that on its head and recognizes that the best way to keep both people and nature safe over the long term, is by helping people and the infrastructure we rely on move out of harm's way,out of the places that water wants to be, and remove that infrastructure—unbuild—and restore a naturally functional floodplain.

JAY FEINSTEIN: We're talking about retreating from these floodplains. How does that actually happen in practice?

EMMA GILDESGAME: So, the simple answer is not enough. The simple answer is it happens very, very rarely in Massachusetts, but in a hypothetical system, some sort of government entity sets up a program—historically it's been with federal funding—where they have funding to purchase homes. And so, the actual sale part of it is pretty similar

to anything else that you may have seen if you've bought or sold a home. And so, there's negotiation over the value of the home, a whole bunch of paperwork where you sign your name a million times and you sell the home.

A program will go out and find funding and, ideally, will have a good solid funding source. In some places this is through state level taxes, there's bond bills that have done this. State-level funding is really important, especially in the absence of federal funding, because municipalities, especially in places like Massachusetts where we have a lot of small towns, they can't do it on their own.

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EMMA GILDESGAME: That funding just doesn't exist right now. Not at the local level, the state level or the federal level. It's really hard to get momentum for such a program without a federally recognized disaster. And then there's the political challenges involved in driving that momentum because of how sensitive the subject is.

In the United States, there's a history of relocating people against their will and decision makers know it's hard to build trust in a relocation plan. And this was all top of mind when I first asked leaders if there had been conversations about relocation.

JAY FEINSTEIN: And this was a crazy idea when you raised that question, essentially.

EMMA GILDESGAME: It was a really taboo idea. It was something that they weren't comfortable talking about because the reality is, governments, understandably, are really, really cautious about saying, we're gonna take your home. There's so much wrapped up in eminent domain and governments pushing people out for highway projects, for the mass displacements that have happened to indigenous folks, to communities of color who have been completely moved out of their communities for highway projects, that a lot of municipal government staff are really hesitant to touch anything that talks about relocation.

JAY FEINSTEIN: I would be hesitant as a citizen too, because I might know that climate change is happening, I might know that flooding is real and getting worse, but a home might be where I grew up, where my family is, where my friends are, where my community is. It might be a place that has meaning. People have connection to the land and hearing that, oh, one day we're not gonna be here, that could be overwhelming, especially the first time you hear that.

EMMA GILDESGAME: And that's one of the really important things to be focused on. I think you hit the nail on the head of we're not just talking about, oh, we're gonna move a sewer line, we're gonna move a parking lot—which is something that has happened and needs to continue happening—we're talking about how can we help you move your home and live somewhere different than where you maybe thought you were gonna live for the rest of your life. Or your dream house that you didn't move into that long ago but you already are deeply connected to. But, the thing that people are starting to realize is, it's not always a question of do I get to stay in my home or do I have to leave? Where we're getting to is, it's a question of, do I leave on my own terms or do I wait for a huge storm to come and flood everything in my home before I can leave? And so, what we're really talking about is giving people the tools to make a decision before they're forced to.

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EMMA GILDESGAME: Here's the reality. Right now, we're not set up for this kind of change. There isn't funding or logistical support available, and there's no way for someone who wants a buyout today to get one. But that doesn't mean it's hopeless. In fact, the momentum is real. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts increasingly recognizes that it has a role to play in helping people move out of the floodplain in our state. In addition to funding these events, they're conducting studies into what a buyout program could look like in Massachusetts. Events like Winthrop's are planting seeds, they're making sure that when the funding arrives, people are ready, and they're helping the state understand what people need to face this challenge. This wasn't just a community meeting, it was a chance to imagine a new kind of future.

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EMMA GILDESGAME: So, at our community event in Winthrop where we had a community conversation, people were talking about making room for Belle Isle Marsh to move, talking about creating community space and boardwalks, talking about creating an asset that brings people into the community. Talking about how doing restoration on a site, or creating some sort of value-add natural feature on the site, could be an asset overall for the town of Winthrop.

And so, doing this work in advance, not waiting for a disaster, being able to think when we have time, when it's not that urgency of crisis, gives us opportunities to benefit the communities who are facing these really, really hard decisions. It can actually make it a little exciting to say, "what could be?"

JAY FEINSTEIN: It gives people hope.

EMMA GILDESGAME: It gives people hope. And I think it also gives people in really painful conversations, [it] makes things tangible. I think one of the really hard things about saying we need a different system is we're limited by people's ability to imagine that different system, and so, if we start bringing in pictures and ideas and leaving opportunities for people to say, well, I love this.

At the Winthrop community meeting, I had a whole conversation about how wonderful this resident thought it was when kids bike to school in a big group. And so, we were talking about what if we have some way of creating more bike and walking infrastructure to help people move around Winthrop more easily without a car. That could be really cool. That could also build resilience by building stronger social connections and by also giving people more opportunities for safe ways to get around.

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EMMA GILDESGAME: This may be a story about disaster, but it's also a story of hope—people want to act and they want to do it together.

JAY FEINSTEIN: What's your vision for the future?

ANNA LEARY: I feel really optimistic that a night like tonight brought together so many different voices of people who usually would not sit in a room. And I think part of that is our commission has reached out at the community level to the eight hotspots. We've done the work to integrate a lot of our thoughts and a lot of our thinking into planning that's already taken place over the last decade in Winthrop, but we're also bringing people with us and trying to get as much input as possible as to where the needs are, where the gaps are, where our vulnerabilities are, but also taking that perspective of compassion.

And a lot of the people who showed up today were people from the social justice community, people who are concerned about their neighbors, people who have been disappeared recently. But also recognizing that the way that we protect one another is by coming together in community to create that social resilience. And so, as important as the science is, as important as the financial planning is, as important as the political will is—and those are all components to how you make a plan like this come to life and come to action—I think seeing the community come together in a way that I've never seen before, after almost a decade of living here, all using the same language, nobody disagreeing about what's happening, we're all on the same page, gives me optimism. It makes me feel like [we] are at a point where we can make change happen here.

EMMA GILDESGAME: Town Counselor DaRos agrees. He says the only way to move forward is together, we all have to do our part.

JOHN DAROS: I wanna be able, when I visit my nephews, to be able to look them in the eye and say, “yeah, uncle Johnny's trying to do something for your future, guys”. So, that's why we do this work.

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EMMA GILDESGAME: Thanks for listening to *Nature is the Solution*, a podcast from The Nature Conservancy. Next week, we explore the relationship between people and rivers. Could the key to our future be flowing right past us?

MAREA GABRIEL: I think of rivers like arteries for the Earth. And so, like our circulatory system that carries blood, oxygen and vital substances to sustain human life, rivers carry water, oxygen, sediment, nutrients that sustain healthy, fresh water and ultimately sustaining all lives, people and nature.

EMMA GILDESGAME: Stay tuned for next week. For more episodes, search for our show on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or wherever you listen.

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