

How Chatham County Built a Resilience Program That Puts People First

Summary

What does climate resilience actually look like at the county level? For coastal Chatham County, it means thinking about everything from rooftop solar on government buildings to daycare access, because a single shock, like a hurricane closing local daycares, can ripple through an entire community. In this Georgia Climate Digest interview, host Eriqah Vincent talks with Jackie Jackson, Chatham County's first Resilience Program Administrator, about how she built the county's resilience program from the ground up starting in 2022, and what other Georgia communities can learn from her approach.

Key Takeaways

- Chatham County launched its Resilience Program in 2022 after a decade of major storms convinced elected officials to move from reacting to each event toward planning ahead of them, making Jackie one of the first hires of this kind for a South Georgia county.
- The program's initiatives touch nearly every county department, including rooftop solar on 14 municipal buildings, the county's first code updates since the 1960s, a 2025 purchase of the undeveloped Green Island for storm buffering and land conservation, and new EV charging infrastructure sited along hurricane evacuation routes.
- Jackie's team engaged Gullah Geechee community members and faith-based leaders directly, using maps and specific questions instead of presenting a finished plan, so historically underserved communities could help shape where infrastructure gets built.
- With no dedicated budget, the program has grown mainly through partnerships, with the military at Hunter Army Airfield, local nonprofits, and area universities, and Jackie's advice to other Georgia governments is to build relationships before worrying about funding.
- Jackie sees hope in elected officials increasingly bringing resilience into the conversation from the start, and in the growing willingness across the Georgia coast to invest in long-term protection, like preserved shoreline and land conservation.

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Eriqah Vincent: Hello, everyone. Thank you so much for joining us for this Drawdown Georgia interview series. We are so happy to have Jackie Jackson here with us today. Jackie is the Resilience Program Administrator for Chatham County, Georgia. Hi, Jackie, thank you so much for being here.

Jackie Jackson: Absolutely. Thank you for having me. I appreciate it.

Eriqah Vincent: We're excited to talk to you, so let's jump right in. Please introduce yourself to our audience and tell us a little bit about the work you do as Resilience Program Administrator for Chatham County.

Jackie Jackson: Sure thing. As you said, I'm with Chatham County, specifically unincorporated Chatham County. You're probably familiar with the city of Savannah, which is located within the boundaries of Chatham County, so that's where we sit in coastal Georgia. I've been in this program for a little over four years now, and it's been drinking from a fire hose ever since, because there's so much to do and so many funding sources that have come down recently.

My background is in biology. I've been working in environmental planning, community planning, and urban planning for 30 years now, specifically in Chatham County and the surrounding area. So it's been great to see the transition and progress in this community that I actually call home. I'm from Chatham County, born and raised, so everything I do is personal, to say the least.

Environmental planning, and then long-range planning with a focus on water, is where I started. Then I grew into a focus on climate change, resilience, and sea level rise.

Eriqah Vincent: Wonderful, thank you so much for that rundown. We're going to talk more about what resilience means for Chatham County and the work you all are doing. You were hired to help start Chatham County's Resilience Program in 2022. What prompted the county to establish this program? That seems kind of pioneering for a South Georgia county.

Jackie Jackson: I think what really gave me a different perspective is that I've been here from the get-go, working in this world as a planner for Chatham for so many years. We've been dealing with new events, new situations, and new planning perspectives, and local government is what it is, we're always trying to do so many things, but we were more in a reactive stage than a proactive one focused on mitigation. I think that's really what allowed this program to stand up and get support.

We've had so many storms and situations hit Chatham County and the coast over the past 10 years that our elected officials became comfortable bringing in a different mindset. We'd been doing so many things for so long, but there was never really an entity, a program, or even a person, with that higher-level perspective of everything going on.

We see resilience within the county as much more holistic than just sustainability. We see it down to the human scale, because so many things affect different aspects of a community, a human being, and a family, and we were all working on different pieces separately. We needed an entity like resilience to get a bigger view of what was going on across the whole community. That's really what was driving it, along with the sense that we'd been planning for a long time and it was time to start implementing some of what we'd been talking about.

It really lent itself to starting a program in the resilience realm. Honestly, I was very lucky. I had the support of elected officials and county management who said, "As long as you can do X, Y, and Z, we're going to make this move and see where it goes." I think we've been very successful since it started. You're right that there isn't necessarily another community doing resilience exactly like this. It's a little bigger in scope than most, but I think that's been rewarding and productive.

Eriqah Vincent: That's helpful. Just as a quick follow-up, you talked about how Chatham County's resilience program has a bigger scope and connects to the human-centered side, not just sustainability. We hear the word "resilience" a lot these days, and there are a lot of ways folks use that term. For our audience, could you define how your office sees resilience?

Jackie Jackson: I think ultimately, it comes down to how we position ourselves as a county, both internally and externally, to allow our residents and members to handle shocks and stressors, and come out of them in a better position.

Underlying everything is climate: the changing climate, sea level rise, flooding, heat, and economic development as well, along with all the impacts that come with that. There's so much to it, but I think it really comes down to shocks and stressors, and wanting to be better off than we were before they happened.

Eriqah Vincent: That makes sense, and I think it's helpful for people to understand how that takes different shape depending on location. You mentioned sea level rise and flooding, which would be part of resilience for a coastal county, while other places might be dealing with different types of weather depending on where they are.

Jackie Jackson: Exactly. And I'd add, what has enabled me, and probably makes some of my coworkers say, "oh my gosh, Jackie's here again," is that the umbrella of resilience reaches into so much of what the county is doing and trying to accomplish every day for our community.

We know about drainage and sea level rise, the typical things people think of. Heat is an extreme situation we're going through right now. But when we talk about shocks and stressors, we're also talking about economic development and its impacts on the community through air quality, traffic, and noise. And at the human scale, there are things like daycare availability, a living wage, access to medical care, and food insecurity. These all fall under the four pillars we focus on, and all of it comes back to that human scale.

If a daycare closes, and a parent can't get to work because they can't take their child with them, that creates a huge shock that becomes a stressor for that person and the community as a whole. Realizing that has been eye-opening, not just for me and the community, but for our elected officials and where we put our dollars and start walking the walk as a community.

Housing is another area we're diving into. Everything is interconnected. None of it is really a standalone issue, there's a domino effect through all of it. I think changing the mindset of the community and our elected officials has been key to this whole framework, and that's truly what we're building and working from. It's been challenging, but really rewarding, seeing the light bulbs go off for people.

Eriqah Vincent: We talk a lot on this show about interconnectedness and the different layers people are dealing with in their lives every day, like a shock such as flooding, and daycares closing, to your point. From your standpoint, what initiatives has the Resilience Program in Chatham County focused on since its founding?

Jackie Jackson: I'll preface this by saying that when the county brought me on board, the timing was very good. A lot of federal funding was coming down, we're talking ARPA, bouncing back from so much, including COVID. So I walked in and was grant-driven. I was going for the funding, and there was a lot of it out there. It was one of those, "okay, we're going to see what sticks." I started applying for things I thought were priorities. Some were low-hanging fruit that made a lot of sense, and others were going to take a harder, more stepwise approach.

From the get-go, I felt we should look at Chatham inside our own house first, or at least start there. So we stepped into the world of solar, working on building that program, and we're now inching toward 14 municipal buildings with solar installed so far, including one of our largest at our jail and sheriff's complex, which you can imagine is a big undertaking. We've been able to accomplish a lot with the solar program.

I was also able to get grants and start working on municipal codes and policies. I come from the world of policy, so I firmly believe a strong foundation, and updating your codes to reflect the improvements we need, has to happen sooner rather than later. For what it's worth, Chatham County has done a lot of band-aids over the years, but hadn't formally updated its codes since the 1960s. There's a lot of work to do, but we're moving forward. That's when we really started looking at our engineering code, subdivision code, tree ordinances, and building codes, with a lens of climate change in mind. I think it's also led to strong partnerships between jurisdictions here in Chatham County, including the city of Savannah and others.

One thing I've been really proud of is the work we're doing in land conservation. At the end of 2025, Chatham County bought an island, Green Island, off the coast. It's undeveloped, pristine, and historic, with a lot of cultural resources we're still discovering through surveys. We decided to purchase it because we didn't want it developed, but also because it serves as a mitigation

buffer for storms, since we have developments right next door. It's also in an area deemed high pollution susceptibility within the state, so we're protecting it from direct development, and it sits in a groundwater recharge area.

That property had been on my list for a while, and we were able to get funding and support through the state of Georgia, matched our own dollars, and approached the private landowners, who were surprised and happy that we wanted to conserve it. We've gotten a ton of support for that project, the Green Island Conservation Project, and I haven't heard a single negative comment about it from a resident or anyone in the community, because it just makes so much sense. We're going to keep growing that program.

We've also stepped into the world of electric vehicles. Chatham County doesn't currently have an electric vehicle fleet, so we felt it made sense to look at our infrastructure first and figure out where it makes sense to put charging systems, before buying a bunch of EVs with nowhere to charge them. I've been working with Georgia Power on their Make Ready program, and they've helped us get our first electric vehicle chargers installed at our fleet facility, so we're now working on integrating EVs into our fleet.

We were also awarded a grant from the South Coast Regional Commission, which looked at electric vehicles as a workforce development component, as well as infrastructure. That grant is specifically about EV infrastructure along hurricane evacuation routes. We don't want that infrastructure placed in areas that are going to flood, so we're looking 25 years out and making sure we're making wise investments, factoring in groundwater tables, sea level rise, and other layers. We have boundaries all over with islands, so that became important.

What really brought this to light was in 2024, when we had evacuations from Florida ahead of storms, and people were coming up the coast through Chatham County. We didn't have the infrastructure in place for them to charge their electric vehicles, and where infrastructure did exist, not all of it worked. That set off some light bulbs, so it made sense to look at this from a multi-pronged approach. That project is still in progress, finishing up at the end of August.

We were able to reach out to Savannah Technical College, which works in the world of electric vehicles, to talk about how we could work together and look at workforce development as a deliverable. When I started having conversations about electric vehicles, I also pulled in our fire department, and they were very interested, both because of our growing EV fleet and because EVs are increasingly coming through the community. They didn't feel prepared to handle the type of fires that can come from electric vehicles. We feel good about the vehicles themselves, but there wasn't enough training, and the technology keeps changing. So I was able to bring them in and work with Savannah Tech to build training and educational materials.

Going back to the intent of the project, we wanted to make sure this infrastructure also served communities that may not have direct access to public transportation, or who might be looking at electric vehicles as an option, especially in multifamily developments in other parts of the

county. So we looked closely at the socioeconomic breakdown to make sure we weren't creating areas of unequal access. That helped us ground-truth where to eventually put the infrastructure, so people can actually use these systems, tying into a larger perspective that includes public transportation and buses as well.

Eriqah Vincent: That's a really innovative project, and I really like what you said about bringing in the fire department, places where people don't automatically think things are connected. I wouldn't have thought of it until you said it.

Jackie Jackson: Right, and not just fire, but also police, tow truck drivers, and parking lots, it's a whole thing. At this point, almost every department in the county knows who I am in some way, because I'm always asking questions about something. Which is good, because the original intent was to think holistically, pull departments together, and be more deliberate about where our efforts and dollars are spent, not just for the county, but for residents. It really does make sense.

Eriqah Vincent: You're talking about the electric vehicle program, which is an innovative and pioneering effort for you all. What feedback have you gotten from residents about the program, and how has that impacted the county's plans?

Jackie Jackson: This particular project is in its very final stages. I was literally working on a draft of the document today, so we'll continue putting that out to the community. Through this effort, I wanted to be deliberate about bringing community champions to the table, people we've seen at community meetings, city council meetings, and county meetings, and use them as a tool to get input, but also to get the message out that we want input.

We specifically pulled in faith-based leaders through what's called our Disaster Faith Network, which our emergency management team put together for Chatham. As you can imagine, when there's a shock or stressor, nine times out of 10 a community member is going to go to their church, their leader, whoever that trusted person is. Instead of coming in with a "we're the government, we're here to help, let us fix it" approach, we wanted to help stand them up. We went to those organizations and said, "We'd love to make sure this project works for your community, can you help us get to your community so we're truly getting input?" Those community champions and faith-based communities were huge.

But honestly, what I was really trying to be diligent about was gaining the trust of the community. Working on comprehensive plans in the past, I've learned, not that I have all the answers, because that's not it, but that I know the questions to ask a little better now. So this was a different effort, sitting down and going through maps, saying, "I'm putting one here, what do you think? Have you had flooding here? Would neighbors object? What about lighting?" That kind of thing. I think that's what made it a little different, it was much more targeted in getting input than we've done in the past.

Eriqah Vincent: Expanding on that, how do you ensure that historically disadvantaged communities have a seat at the table in resilience planning, and what advice would you give other local governments to make sure vulnerable communities are included?

Jackie Jackson: Chatham County is very lucky in that we have a number of nonprofits solely focused on this work, Harambee House is one, and Dr. McLean has been in the region since the '90s, if not before, really driving home issues like air quality early on. I've been involved with them since then.

Knowing who those champions are, that's what I mean by community champions, know who to target and really ask for help. Because they've been raising these issues, and we've been listening, and now I need their help making sure I've heard them right.

We also have a large Gullah Geechee community here in Pin Point and those areas, wonderful people, and we've been working in those communities as well to strengthen that partnership. The county hasn't always been as involved with that community, and I've made it a mission to go to their community meetings and say I'm working on this. Their main contact literally has my cell phone, and she'll text me, "Jackie, I need you, we have a light out," a true scenario about a traffic light or street light. Making those partnerships and connections, and doing what you say you're going to do, has been so important.

As these communities are more and more impacted by extreme heat, continual flooding, and land use changes, bringing them to the table at the very beginning, instead of saying "here's what we've decided you need," is a real change in mindset. Our board and elected officials support that. They now ask, before we get started, "who are you bringing to the table?" It's a whole shift. I think you get buy-in, you get support, you get ownership, and you accomplish more for your community. The electric vehicle infrastructure project is just one example. We can't solve the whole puzzle, but it's helped set up strong partnerships in communities we just haven't had before, not as strong as we have now. Continuing that communication is everything. We're all human beings and residents, and you show support and respect for that.

Eriqah Vincent: We've talked on this show about what organizations and governments are doing to make sure they're building authentic relationships with communities, not just to check a box for a grant or get work done, but real relationships, where people have your phone number and know you'll figure out how to get something handled for them.

Jackie Jackson: Exactly, and they voice that to me. Historically disadvantaged or disenfranchised communities, that shouldn't be a thing anymore, and as local government, we're recognizing that and taking those extra steps. Just realizing it and communicating that outwardly is huge.

Eriqah Vincent: And it means a lot to people to get an honest answer, even something like, "I'm working on it, but give me a couple of days and I'll get back to you." Sometimes that matters

more to the relationship than getting the thing done immediately, because there's trust being built.

Jackie Jackson: It's building trust, and that's what truly makes a community more resilient. That's the human scale we're trying to get down to, that when you have shocks and stressors, you're able to rebound if you at least know who to call.

Eriqah Vincent: How do you determine what to pursue first, and how do you balance the climate mitigation side with climate adaptation priorities? There's so much going on from a climate perspective in Chatham County.

Jackie Jackson: There's not a perfect answer, honestly. A lot of it comes down to who's on your board, what your elected officials' priorities are, and funding. It's about understanding what the needs are at a higher level, figuring out where I can be positioned to help, and using other finances or resources for other projects, while recognizing that we all have competing resources.

The county has enabled resilience to have a seat at the table during the budget planning process for most of the larger departments. I'm finishing a project now called the Resilience Roadmap for Chatham County. One of the big ideas was that instead of creating new plans and new projects, we should look at what we've already had on the shelf, adopted, and promised over the years. Those are still viable strategies and projects. Let's see what's maybe stalled, and where this program can help lift up another program or project, and bring people back to the table so there's a realization and a reminder.

It's a process and a change in mindset, and there's a huge learning curve, but it's only getting better. I think we've been successful, not perfect, but successful.

Eriqah Vincent: I really like what you said, and I want to make sure people don't miss it, instead of trying to create new things, what do we already have on the shelf that we wanted to do, that we couldn't do at the time? What can we bring back that we've already wanted to do, instead of spending capacity building something new, but making good on the promises we've already made?

Jackie Jackson: Exactly, I think that's really important. It becomes that human scale again, helping each other accomplish the bigger goal.

Eriqah Vincent: You've already dropped so many gems. What advice would you give other Georgia policymakers who want to pursue resilience initiatives in their county or city, but face challenges like funding access?

Jackie Jackson: The willingness to have conversations outside of your typical circle is huge, and I can't say enough about conversations and partnerships. I think we've accomplished so much solely because of partnerships, talking to people you may already know, and people you don't.

We've teamed up and done a lot of work with the military. We have a military presence here, Hunter Army Airfield within Chatham County, and our sister installation, Fort Stewart. They want to accomplish a lot of the same things we do, and we recognize that, for instance, 70% of Hunter Army Airfield staff and families live in Chatham County. So what we're doing to improve our community also helps them, and there are players at the federal level who can speak on our behalf. Collectively, we've been able to team up and get out of our silos much more than in the past. We've reached out to nonprofits as partners instead of thinking of them as barriers, groups like our Riverkeepers, Drawdown Georgia, and Georgia Conservancy's Land Trust, and honestly almost anyone with an environmental component to their work.

We have nine jurisdictions in Chatham County, and we're doing a better job of coordinating through an effort we call One Chatham, instead of planning within each jurisdiction and keeping those silos. This past week, I pulled our city planners together, just about 10 of us on a call, to talk about data centers, and they said, "thank you for doing this, we've got to get back to having these conversations." That's where you build partnerships and friendships, and where communities become willing to say, "I'll work with you on this grant," or, "I'd like to do this, what do you think?"

So much of what I've accomplished has been without dedicated funding, at least at the staff level. I'm a one-woman show. I like to say I have a strong team of three: me, myself, and I, in the resilience program. So the idea that you need a ton of staff isn't necessarily true, it's not that more staff wouldn't help, I could certainly use more, but you can accomplish a lot with partners, conversations, and stakeholders. I'll help a smaller community write a grant if it benefits both of us. They may not have staff, but I know how to write grants, and I'm fine helping with that.

It's about a willingness to step outside our typical comfort zones and build those partnerships. That's the one big takeaway I'd offer. And it works both ways, nonprofits and academic institutions can go to their local planners and local government and say, "we want to be at the table with you." We have strong partners in Savannah State University, Georgia Southern University, the University of Georgia, Georgia Tech, and Savannah Tech, and pulling them all to the table when it's appropriate creates a huge web of resources. It turns both ways for the general public too, and you create a tighter community that can bounce back better after these shocks and stressors. That's my one general takeaway, and it doesn't cost anything to have those conversations and put yourself out there, to say honestly, "I don't have money to bring to the table, but I have a skill set, and I'm willing to stand up and do the job."

Eriqah Vincent: More and more, especially on this show, I've learned from folks who aren't just in private business or nonprofits, but in city and county government, and not just in Atlanta, in other parts of the state, who've figured out how to make sure their communities are prepared for

the shocks and stressors that come with extreme weather, floods, and hurricanes. That's not a partisan issue. Everyone in Chatham County wants to make sure their houses and themselves will be okay in a flood. So how do you make sure those folks are prepared for that, period, regardless of political ideology? I think that's so important, and we've learned so much on this show about it.

Jackie Jackson: Agreed. And to your point, Georgia doesn't have a state resilience office or a state resilience officer, so we don't get a lot of direction from that level. It comes down to the local level: make it pertinent to your community, figure out what the biggest needs are, and start chipping away at those, figuring out collectively how to get it done. That's kind of the crux of how I've tried to move forward with this, as much as possible. It's a ton of work, depending on how much you want to take on, and not everyone knows the behind-the-scenes, day-to-day struggles of local government. But understanding that middle ground, and relaying it, saying "I hear you, I want to help you, I want to accomplish that too, I've got this priority, I'm going to figure out how to make it work at the same time, and we're going to move forward, we may not get all the way to the finish line yet, but we're going to start walking that road," is critical.

Eriqah Vincent: Thank you so much, Jackie, this has been so helpful, and I've learned a lot, and I'm sure our audience will too. I have one more question, my favorite question. I want to continue to talk to folks and hear from our guests about hope, because it's so important, especially right now, with things sometimes feeling so divisive. So, what is giving you hope for climate in Georgia?

Jackie Jackson: All the good work. I think local government is often our own worst enemy, in that we don't talk about all the great stuff that's going on that we're accomplishing. People tend to only hear the negative, but I see it, I hear the conversations, and I see staff trying to do really awesome work. We just don't always have time to tell all the good stories.

I think we've got so many people willing to step up. Unfortunately, recent storms have highlighted how critical and delicate our specific community is along the coast, and people are paying attention, even if it took something unfortunate to get there. But it's also bringing to light some of the critical protection that needs to happen. Georgia has 100 miles of protected coastline, thanks in part to a nonprofit here as well, and I'm seeing a real willingness from our elected officials to buy property that will be preserved and conserved forever, to say, "let's buy an island." It's refreshing to see folks who were on one side of the perspective switch to understanding what resilience can accomplish. Seeing elected officials say, "can we talk more about this, because this is really good," shows a real change in mindset, and seeing that the work is working.

We're doing more than we've ever done before, and I say that as a resident of Chatham County, born and raised. We have less flooding in some areas that I remember flooding as a child, and more flooding in others that didn't used to flood, but there's a strong, continued willingness to

keep doing the work. We've got good people here who want to protect our environment and our resources. It's pretty amazing, honestly, and it's what keeps me going to work every day.

Eriqah Vincent: It seems so. That's great. Jackie, I can't tell you how appreciative I am of this conversation. Thank you so much for joining us today, and for banging the drum on this great work.

Jackie Jackson: Absolutely, I really appreciate it too.

Eriqah Vincent: Thank you all so much for joining us once again for the Drawdown Georgia Climate Digest interview series. We'll see you all next time. Bye.