

Waterbury Natural Disaster Preparedness Committee
Meeting Minutes
7/29/2024

Opening: The meeting was held in the Steele Community Room, Waterbury Municipal Center. The meeting was called to order at 5:30 p.m.

Present: Forrest McDonald, Matt Dugan, Bette Lewicke, Kane Sweeney (Select Board representative to the committee), Municipal Manager Tom Leitz, Select Board member Roger Clapp

Absent: John Malter

Approval of Minutes: Unanimous approval of minutes at 5:31

Approval of Agenda: Matt motioned to approve agenda; Forrest seconded.
Vote: Unanimous at 5:31 p.m.

Business from Previous Meeting: The flood of 2024 occurred in between meetings and so this became the topic of the meeting.

New Business: Bette asked about the geographical location of the damage and Tom and Kane and Matt offered their impressions of where the damage occurred and why.

Forrest asked of the Select Board what a typical deliverable is for town committees. Kane offered that the committee has a singular purpose, unlike other committees. Our focus, he said, is natural disasters. This includes materials and the needs of the community and the volunteers, with the idea that our committee should be sitting around the table for the next disaster, not CReW, whose job is long-term recovery.

Forrest expressed concern about our capacity to do this.

Kane suggested that multiple meetings per month were allowable.

Tom clarified that the emergency manager of the town (the fire chief) would not be performing the management of the cleanup. Roger's vision is that the committee would be "coordinating the volunteer response" because having the town take this role on is not adequate.

Matt asked if Tom Drake has been replaced. Tom said that replacing him was a question of what the town will be investing post-flood. Matt suggested that hiring a disaster management person would be very helpful, someone who would oversee the response who would manage leaders who would then manage volunteers. As examples of the need for this system, Matt mentioned that many volunteers were underprepared for the homes they entered and in other cases, volunteers showed up where they weren't really needed. A level of training and assessment is needed that CReW cannot provide due to their resources being maxed out.

The committee was unanimous in its high regard for the work done by CReW during the latest disaster.

Tom clarified the emergency manager role: their job ends when the floodwaters recede, and people's power is restored. Our committee would not deal with this aspect of the situation. Matt said that his concern is the adequate training of volunteers so they can be safe.

Tom: How do we find an employee who will take the lead but not have a lot of work a lot of the time but when needed to drop everything, they'd drop everything to address a disaster? "We're looking for a unicorn here."

Forrest mentioned that part of the job would be continued recruitment and training and said that, if these events occur a couple of times per year, there is state guidance that this should become part of the operational expenditures for the town.

Roger: We're learning how to take on new responsibilities. Does the town want to absorb more costs?

Tom: The answer may be in organization: volunteers who get paid when they respond. "That's affordable."

Kane agreed that this was a possibility for "10 or 12 volunteers." Tom: Every month they show up and test the pumps and check the equipment and make sure everything's ready to go.

Matt asked if this was possible to do on top of having a part-time year-round position such as the one Tom Drake formerly filled.

Tom: You need a chief. That's a stipend plus something extra if someone is needed for 2-3 weeks.

Roger: When the idea for the committee first came up, his thought was that we needed one group for immediate response, one group to take on long-term recovery, and perhaps a third to look at mitigation; the Board opted not to create the third group but CReW, while having the mission of doing long-term recovery, has also taken on immediate response and has a wealth of experience to draw from. Therefore, we need to involve them in the conversation.

Tom: If Liz were the chief and were paid and had a team of volunteers supporting her, would she be able/willing to do the job? They get some funding from the town and does fundraising.

Forrest: We've discussed as a committee what our role should be—creating something new or supporting CReW.

Kane: CReW operates beyond Waterbury and so if we rope CReW into all of this, do Waterbury taxpayers foot the bill for helping the communities around us?

Roger: We already do this in ways, e.g., Waterbury Recreation. Because we're the largest town in this part of the county, we're relied upon by the other towns around us.

Matt: We all need to do what we do best as volunteers.

Matt expressed the irony that he didn't have time to work on recruiting volunteers using his professional experience because he'd been using his time volunteering, and feeling the need to volunteer more often as the supply of volunteers dwindles.

Tom: Should the committee's focus be on homeowners and making sure they have the tools to be prepared? Before the July flood, to rent a commercial unit was \$100/wk. It's now \$500. If you live in a flood plain and you've been flooded three times, should the town pay for your dehumidifier? The Select Board must have the public/private conversation about where that line is. The committee can be making sure people know what they can do on their own and what the town's role will and won't be. "We've created the expectation in certain neighborhoods that there's always going to be help and it's your money." If we want that to continue, he'll make sure it continues. "That's my job." But how far does this go and how much of the preparation should be on the individual?

Matt supported the point and brought up the word "triage." If people are leaving 50 years' worth of stuff in their basement, it takes an inordinate amount of time to clean it up; three other homes could've been addressed in the same amount of time. This also burns volunteers out.

Forrest: You can operate a volunteer force for an emergency but if we design this to be a twice-annual thing, people are not going to be enthusiastic about bailing out the same houses in the same flood-prone neighborhoods.

Tom: Would like the committee to think about what prudent investments the town should make in terms of machinery and equipment that the town can have ready to deploy. Shop vacs, a vacu-truck for \$500,000, etc. Would love us to supply him a list of what to buy.

Forrest: What's the state saying to the towns about this/guidance?

Tom: "You're on your own." They don't have the staff beyond the call center, which is insufficient.

Kane: Picture our response like the volunteer fire department. We have fail-safes in our homes (e.g., smoke detectors) and when they're not enough, we call the fire department. We should ask ourselves what are the measures that would need to fail in the home before they call in for help in the event of a flood.

Matt agreed that we as a committee should come up with a list of recommendations. This list would be distributed to the town and, while it might not be read by a majority of the residents, would "get us off the hook" in terms of how to prioritize the later volunteer response to an emergency "because we can't keep doing what we're doing" regarding how we use the volunteers. In many cases, volunteers are moving things from basements that would have been someone else's responsibility eventually, the only difference being that the possessions got wet.

Matt continued that our volunteer corps could offer pre-disaster moving help: getting things out of basements when the weather is dry and the possessions are undamaged. The triage part of this is that, if people choose not to take advantage of this service or perform it themselves, then in the event of a natural disaster, volunteers will get to them but it could be a long time because we have prioritized homes that we can clean out and protect from mold more quickly.

Kane: We can highly recommend that, like having a fire extinguisher, people should have a pump in their home.

Tom cited a home on Randall that has three sump pumps and a sealed basement; in the latest event, they had a wet basement but no damage. Their electrical panel is still in the basement. Roger said the same thing happened at the Prohibition Pig.

Forrest: Is there a financial incentive for the town to encourage residents to flood-proof? Tom: No.

Tom: While there were town-sponsored sandbags and volunteers to fill them for the most recent event, we need to figure out a longer-term solution about the provision and storage of sandbags, some way the town can “pick them up and drop a pallet of sandbags on a street corner and say, ‘Take them.’” The town doesn’t have a place for them as of today but is working on this. Maybe the committee can figure out how many we need.

Forrest: Likes the idea of empowering homeowners to take action on their own and using the volunteer corps to help the elderly and infirm take preventive measures.

Tom: There is no way to engineer our way out of the issue (e.g., dredging). If you dredge the river to compress all the flood-plain water into the river, you’d have to do it from South Barre to Richmond. This is not financially or physically feasible.

Matt mentioned one home that had taken all the right measures and it made for a much easier cleanup. “That’s the tragedy we want to respond to, not like, ‘Oh, I just didn’t bother to throw anything away for 50 years.’” And we want to take care of those homes, too, but it will not happen until we finish working on the homes are easier to address because they took measures ahead of time.

“I’d love a year or two without floods so that we can just keep putting out information about, ‘Sure, we’ll come, we’ll bring sandbags to your house. Plenty of people will volunteer their trucks. I’d be happy to load sandbags and unload them at somebody’s house.’”

Forrest: There’s also information. Is it just from private companies such as Northern Basement where people are learning what to do with their properties? Could there be an opportunity for the town to offer a playbook that says something like, this is what to do as well?

Matt: CREW did something like this last winter. We can contribute to this.

Bette: Bring in the companies who do this kind of work.

Roger: The committee is heading in the right direction regarding homeowners and getting the guide (what we call the disaster response manual) completed. There's overlap between our committee and CReW. We need to set a time for both groups to come together and sort out who's doing what so they're not duplicating efforts and he is glad to be involved with that as well and to have the Select Board involved because we will have to make some investments going forward to be better prepared.

Matt: We seem to have a list that's tackle-able; there are discrete tasks the committee members can work on as homework.

Forrest: Agreed but cautioned about the committee managing the volunteer force.

Kane: I can work on this on the Select Board level with the idea of creating a fire department-like organization.

Tom: It could be a Town Meeting Day item: Does the town want to spend whatever?

There was wide agreement.

Tom: I'm going to present (at the Select Board meeting in the fire house) a "list of items the town is working on for future study and flood mitigation. One of those items would involve the Select Board giving the Planning Commission a task, which is to work on some stormwater regulations, driveway regulations and private road regulations" because a lot of the washout issues were some people's driveways washing out into other people's driveways.

After Irene, there was a conversation about grandfathering in people in the flood plain but when property sold, requiring utilities to be elevated and basements to be filled in. "It was a hot topic for a couple of years and then it died. Maybe that should be another conversation."

Matt: Absolutely.

Forrest: That's a really interesting idea.

Tom: You can apply for an elevation grant through FEMA but it's not worth it (a maximum of \$228,000, which is not likely to be enough money for many homes, and there are a lot of hoops to jump through). So, the Planning Commission could come up with rules that required some of these things to happen as part of a sale.

Matt: We have a housing shortage and if people are buying in a flood plain, they're going to be aware of that and so these measures are unlikely to have a negative effect on home sales.

Tom: If you're talking about elevating your utilities and filling in your basement, "it doesn't strike me as a hundred grand. Maybe fifty."

Matt: If you were looking at \$700,000 on your new house, \$50,000—to give you the safety that you want—is not unreasonable.

Tom: It's not the easiest thing to do. It's not without controversy; it comes down to the public meetings. But maybe it's time.

Matt: This is a good idea because, at the end of the day, there aren't even going to be volunteers to keep doing the cleanup due to burnout. According to Liz, this year, we have had far fewer volunteers than last year for the flooding with a quicker tail-off.

Adjournment: At 6:24, Matt made a motion to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Bette.

Vote: Unanimous

Minutes Submitted By: Matt Dugan