

Presentation to the Vermont Senate Economic Development Committee
Jim Linville, Vice Chair, Town of Weston Selectboard
January 5, 2024

Review the Photographs

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I. Summary:

The viability of Weston's downtown is threatened by future flooding, and unless our flood resilience is improved, the future of Weston's anchor businesses and public institutions is uncertain. Weston's 'village center' is our Green, owned and run by the Farrar Park Association, commonly known as the 'Ladies of the Green' (one of a number of public – private institutions that lie at the heart of Weston's soul). Virtually every building surrounding the Green on the west side of Route 100 was damaged during the storm. Going clockwise, The Weston Village Store, the Post Office, The Little School, our Town Office and across the river from Town Office, The Wilder Memorial Library. Next come two houses on Park Street whose back yards are 'riverfront' property, and the Weston Playhouse – which you'll hear much more about soon. You'll notice that I haven't mentioned the Vermont Country Store, whose catalogs I'm quite sure all of you are familiar with. They suffered only minor physical damage during the flood, but the symbiotic relationship between the Green, the Playhouse and the VCS, The Little School and The Wilder Memorial Library is undoubtedly threatened unless we can identify and implement strong measures to improve Weston's flood resilience.

And the effects of the flood aren't just in our downtown: for a half mile upstream of the dam, flooding inundated homes, businesses and our Volunteer Fire Department.

In all cases, the flooding was worse than in Irene – by feet, not inches.

II. Where we are now:

So here we are, faced with an existential crisis, which I personally take as a once in a lifetime opportunity to make the kind of audacious moves that would be impossible in normal times..... However:

Like many small towns in Vermont, Weston lacks the human infrastructure to deal with these sorts of existential threats. Our community leaders, Selectboard members and volunteers are overwhelmed by the challenges that face us and under qualified to deal with them. The MTAP grant is a big help here, but here we are, six months after the disaster, with no consultants,

no experts, and still facing massive uncertainty about our future. This uncertainty surrounds us – we don't know if the July storm was a 5 year event or a 50 year event. Or a 5 month event – a possibility that was tested last month in the December storm. And of course in addition, we don't know how much we can improve our resilience. Look at the photos of the bridge: there is a lot of missing hydraulic capacity there...

We are grateful for the help we are receiving from the Windham Regional Commission (more on that later) and the attention that has been paid by our Governor, Senators – US and VT - and other state officials, but as you know, new legislation comes slowly and in the meantime many of our local businesses, non-profits, and homeowners are stuck in limbo, not knowing what the future holds. Some are marching forward bravely, spending precious funds to buy protection that might or might not help. Others are holding their breath, frozen in the headlights, waiting for more clarity. And a few are completely overwhelmed – “under water” financially and unable to cope with a condemned building that used to be their home or business and represents far too much of their net worth. Would it be possible for the state to provide mentors or advisors to folks in this latter group? Or low cost financing?

Meantime, we have no Town Manager, no Mayor, and beyond you guys – bless your hearts – we worry that like many small towns in Vermont our needs tend to gravitate toward the end of the line. I'm hoping that by being here Susanna and I can help change that.

III. Our Way Forward:

The Windham Regional Commission is working on a grant to commission a hydraulic study for Weston. The goal of this study is to model flooding in town and analyze the upstream and downstream effects of removing the dam by the Playhouse and/or increasing the hydraulic capacity of the bridge you've seen photos of. Included in this analysis will be “30% engineering studies” which will help us estimate the costs of whatever remediation tasks seem most practical and effective. We are hoping to have those results this coming summer, fingers crossed. Meantime, we have no idea what the grant landscape is going to look like in the coming years, either on the federal or state side.

Having said that, the case for audacious (and undoubtedly expensive) moves is strong. Weston is gaining population, enjoys an engaged (but currently overwhelmed) citizenry, and is a year 'round magnet for tourism in Vermont, and not all in the village – the Weston Priory, the Kinhaven Music School, the Greendale Campground in the Green Mountain National Forest and the Weston Recreation Club all add to what Weston offers. We want to keep it that way, but without a vital downtown village the sum of the parts falls short.

So what will the next July '23 storm cost? As we stand now, the damage to the paved road between route 100 and the bridge cost over \$100,000 to repair and will cost that every single time we have a July '23 flood. The Little School incurred more than \$50,000 in damage. Town office got off easy but the two houses by the river suffered damages well in excess of \$50,000 each. Just cleaning the mud out of the Playhouse basement cost about \$100,000, and Susanna will have more to say about what it's going to take to make it 'theater ready'. Upstream of the dam, the damages I know about include over \$100,000 to the Firehouse and an undetermined loss at the Marketplace. I don't know what the damages are to the four houses that were flooded, but two of them are requesting a FEMA buyout. So spending big money to do big upgrades to our flood resilience? Priceless, but also a great investment for those of you who want to help.

Thank you for your time. Any questions?