

01/10/2024

Hardwick Town Manager, David Upson's Government Ops Testimony

What worked:

Emergency operations & quick action by VTRANS and contractors. I took a picture of a half dozen private dump truck owners that showed up the day after the flooding to help the town with hauling gravel and repairing roads. It was amazing to see how fast the community came together in the aftermath of this flood.

As days passed, I was able to make basic requests to the SEOC as requests came in to the Local EOC.

Communication was seamless and timely. On some of the more complex requests, for example a landslide that occurred leaving a house teetering on the edge of a cliff, information initially relayed to the SEOC needed to be relayed several more times and it was clear that communication was being dropped on the other end. The Police Chief and I were being called individually by different staff members asking the same questions. This confusion was passed down due to the police Chief and I working on different parts of the initial emergency response. This was a lesson learned and something to be improved on in all aspects of emergency response.

The activation of our local Emergency Operation Center allowed local emergency managers to see the plan in action and provided live feedback on what needs to be improved. The local Neighbor to Neighbor group has recently taken on the role of updating and further strengthening our Emergency Response Plan.

Early on, local community organizations stepped up to the plate with staffing emergency shelters, supply distribution & case management. The newly formed Civic Standard a non-profit organization called in over 100 volunteers to assist with mucking and gutting basements in homes damaged by the flooding.

The Hardwick Neighbor to neighbor group answered requests for support on their telephone hotline stood up during the pandemic.

In the days following the flood, Caledonia County was not listed on the Emergency Declaration for the FEMA's Individual Assistance program. On day five, and after all the roads leading into Hardwick were at least passable, I met with FEMA officials on the ground and took them to the homes most affected by the flooding. It was roughly a week later that Caledonia County was included on the IA list. Days following that update, state and federal partners rolled into town.

Tough decisions:

Immediately following the flooding, we realized several homes sustained damage beyond repair.

Homeowners were faced with the decision to enter a buyout program. In all we had eight properties that decided to enroll. The result was four went to the state program and four are in the federal buyout program. The four properties in the state program, through VT Emergency Management, have reached the point of a grant agreement, the four federal properties are still pending initial engagement with the town. I want to shine a light on six additional property owners who were made aware of the buyout program and decided not to enroll due to their fears of not being able to relocate and or find housing in their community. Two of the properties were next door to their immediate family and in one of those instances shared a parcel, so eligibility was an issue. Their decision to stay in "harm's way" was based on the fact that finding a new place to live would be almost impossible and with winter coming, was not an option.

Town Staff is currently working with state partners for hazard mitigation grants for these families who, prior to the flood, were already struggling to make ends meet. State hazard mitigation grants will be key to assisting families with the needed funds to elevate their properties to get them out of "harm's way"

and prevent them from being displaced from future weather events. Keeping these properties on the grand list is a benefit as well.

What needs improvement:

What was noticeable from day one was the amount of manmade debris that was scattered throughout the flood plain on Wolcott Street and littering the river corridor from the site of the (The Inn by the River) Hardwick Motel to the Hardwick Town Line with Wolcott and beyond. Solar panels, metal roofing, personal belongings, tools, building materials, a boat, a motorcycle, a shipping container, propane tanks are just some of the major items that were left behind in the flood.

I had several conversations with FEMA, VEM & VT DEC, days, weeks and months after the flood and in some cases met with those agencies on site and even provided drone footage of some of the worst debris piles. Since July, some of this debris has been picked up by volunteers donating their time and equipment, but most of the bigger and hard to reach items are still remain. In my past I was a wastewater plant operator, it was made clear to me that the state “owned” the river. The state along with the federal government sets the discharge limits for point source pollutions. From day one I asked who is going to clean up the debris in the river? I know Hardwick is not the only community asking this question. The river cleanup should not rest on the individual towns nor the individual owning land along the river to clean. It is counterproductive for towns along the river corridors to compete with other towns for already limited resources in the form of contractors to pull debris out of the river. Furthermore, where will this money come from? FEMA PA will not cover this on the municipal level because in most cases it’s on private property. FEMA IA doesn’t cover this expense either... So, the debris remains.

I kayak at least twice a year with my family from the Elmore Pond Rd F&W access to Oxbow Park in Morrisville. The Lamoille River and Winooski Rivers are natural links to many VT Communities. The LVRT

runs almost parallel to the Lamoille River...Do we want visitors coming to our state to recreate, seeing this debris? I don't. I would like to see a state effort to return the river corridor to the condition it was in prior to July 11 2023.

The future:

With over thirty on our damage inventory, getting projects prioritized and out to bid with available staff will be the challenge. Many of the towns in the Hardwick area have even less staff than us. Over the last two years, the town has requested proposals on several large projects and received no interest.

The need for civil engineers is a must. Initial design work for bridge repair, box culvert upsizing, and riverbank erosion are some of the small projects, the relocation of our wastewater plant and fire station are some of the bigger projects, and design work be the first step in rebuilding much of our damaged infrastructure. I have a letter addressed to me from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service stating: With their work load brought on by the July Flooding in conjunction with their other program requirements, they will not be able to provide engineering services for these projects, and further stating, The town will need to hire out the work to be completed by a third party. The letter goes on to say that technical and engineering expenses may exceed what they are able to cover and ultimately the town will need to come up with the rest. I had to share this letter with the three homeowners enrolled in this program. These three homeowners have lost a significant amount of property, and their homes are at risk of further damage. Timely procurement of specialized services, a workforce to do this recovery work and additional funding all within program requirements, will continue to be a challenge for small town governments.

As we still wait for the initial round of FEMA reimbursements, prioritizing projects and deciding where to insert our remaining financial resources to further recovery efforts is at the forefront of our day-to-day government operations. Borrowing money, even at low interest rates, furthers taxpayers' financial

liabilities when their individual financial liabilities continue to rise. Streamlining government programs and providing assistance with existing human assets is a must.

I have recently met with a VTRANS employee (one of two statewide) who was reassigned by the state's recovery officer to assist communities with some of these challenges. This effort is necessary and should be expanded on because it will be needed.

To close:

Thank you for this opportunity to share my experiences as Hardwick's Town Manager with the aftermath of the July 2023 flooding as well as some perspective as a Hardwick resident. I have spent the last 17 years working in most of the communities in the Northeast Kingdom. Leaving Hardwick every day to serve another community was very rewarding but in 2021 I decided to switch gears and take this position as the Town Manager to work in the community that raised me. I feel that I have a responsibility to make sure no one in the Hardwick community is left to fend for themselves, so please don't leave Hardwick to fend for ourselves in this recovery effort!