

Testimony for the Senate Government Operations Committee

I would like to thank the committee for the chance to give my testimony on behalf of the Town of Londonderry on the state's handling of the flood recovery. For those who may not know the severity of flooding Londonderry sustained in July, I will provide you with a brief overview of the damage that our town experienced. All but about six of our town roads sustained damage and our north village was inundated with over five feet of water. Our north village is the center for commerce in Londonderry and six businesses were forced to shut down. Most of those businesses have since reopened after extensive renovations, while others have chosen to move to less flood prone areas and one continues to try to rebuild.

While I believe that the state has learned some lessons from tropical storm Irene and has done a better job this go around, I believe there are still many aspects that can be improved upon for the next flooding event our state will certainly see in the future. In future events the state could be more proactive in getting the word out that a catastrophic flooding event may be imminent. There was little warning from the state level in the days leading up to the storm in July for both the public and municipalities. Another observation I have made about VEM is that Londonderry has been dealing mostly with Kim Caanarecci who from what I can gather oversees flood recovery for the entire state and I can only imagine how overwhelming it must be for her to have to deal with every town in the state. I believe that if regional managers for VEM were utilized and Kim could oversee them VEM would run a lot smoother than it has in this flood recovery process.

As our town pivoted away from emergency operations in the weeks after the flood and moved to the recovery phase, we quickly realized that our small town did not have the personnel to deal with the immense amount of work that we needed to get done before winter. To deal with the lack of personnel we were forced to hire a specialist to help us deal with the overwhelming amount of FEMA

paperwork we were faced with. Our town was fortunate enough to find a specialist who previously worked for FEMA to help guide us through the FEMA process and that is why Londonderry is one of the towns that is further along in the FEMA process than most towns in the state. Without our recovery expert I'm not sure how we would have accomplished what we have so far. I can't imagine how other towns like Londonderry are dealing with the paperwork without a specialist to help guide them through the process. I believe the state or the regional planning commissions need to have staff that can help guide towns through the FEMA process.

Since the flood event, I have advocated to everyone from the state that a regional approach to flood mitigation needs to occur. If the towns are to ever find a way to mitigate flooding risks, it needs to be done regionally. In Londonderry's case the West River flows through both our north and south villages with the water coming from Weston and traveling through Londonderry on its way to Jamaica. The reason I say we need to look at flood mitigation from a regional view is that whatever mitigation Weston does will create a greater flow of water in the West River coming into Londonderry. Similarly, what Weston and Londonderry do to mitigate flooding will increase the volume of water flowing into Jamaica. The only way to try to mitigate flooding to any extent possible needs to be coordinated by the towns both upstream and downstream to see actual results and not exacerbate the flooding in towns located downstream. The question is, how would this regional mitigation approach be handled; would the state agencies be the ones to help the towns, or would our regional planning commissions be the ones to take on such a project? The one thing I'm sure of is that if we don't pursue the regional approach to flood mitigation then we will continue to see the catastrophic flooding we experienced in July.

Getting into more technical aspects of Londonderry's flood recovery, we have seen breakdowns in interagency communications at the state level. One instance in Londonderry that has highlighted this is the ongoing work we are engaged in concerning the Cobble Ridge Bridge in town. This bridge was completely washed away in Irene except for the bridge abutments which was all

that was left. This bridge is the only town- owned right-of-way to access the twelve or so homes on the other side of the river and a temporary access had to be negotiated with a private landowner to build a temporary road on their property so the residents could get in and out to their homes. A temporary bridge was constructed after Irene and the town has been seeking funding from the state since. In the July flood, both the entrance and exit were washed away to a depth of at least eight feet and the bridge deck was damaged. Again, access had to be negotiated with a private landowner to build a temporary road for the residents, which the landowner stipulated could only be used until the first significant snowstorm of the year.

With no option but to temporarily repair the bridge again, we proceeded with the repair. We want to continue to work with FEMA to replace the bridge with a longer-span bridge, which is what the state has told us we needed to do since Irene. The communication breakdowns became very evident as we worked with FEMA to replace the bridge. On one conference call with FEMA and many state representatives from multiple agencies, we heard multiple contradictions from state officials. One organization would tell us they were not the ones responsible for the decision to replace the bridge and that it was another's decision only to have the other organization say that the other is the one to make the determination. Long story short, it was the most chaotic and unprofessional conference call I have been on.

To add to the confusion, our FEMA PDMG repeatedly asked for the bridge codes and standards from the state only to be directed to multiple documents by different state agencies. At one point we were told a Hydrology and Hydraulics study was in fact codes and standards only to be told the next week by the same person that this is not the case. The H and H studies also come with a disclaimer on the bottom stating more studies may be needed and this is a recommendation. FEMA needs a yes or no answer and recommendations hold no weight with FEMA. FEMA has told us if the state says yes a new bridge is needed then we can proceed, but until a definitive answer is given, we are stuck trying to find another avenue through the FEMA process.

Lastly, I believe the state could do more to help towns prepare for future disaster events by holding regularly scheduled state-sponsored training events such as regional roundtable training involving multiple towns as well as fire and rescue. More training for towns EMD's could also certainly help. I know we all want to see our state better prepared for these events in the future. All our towns and state organizations can and should find ways to better prepare ourselves for future events.

Thank you,

Thomas Cavanagh

Londonderry Selectboard Chair