

**Testimony to Senate Governmental Operations Committee**  
**Testimony Regarding Governmental Response to Floods in 2023**

**01.16.2024**

Bio: Timothy Hanson, retired nurse (Home Health, mostly Hospice), Town Clerk in Ripton from early 1980's until early 2000's (19 years), Selectboard member last 5 years, appointed Road Commissioner in the fall of 2021 when our long-term Road Commissioner died.

Annual road budget approximately \$450K. Anticipated State Aid to roads in FY 23, \$60K. Taxes account for \$220K. Some funding from National Forest (\$67K) and Middlebury College (\$98K).

Serious flooding in July 2023, with estimated cost of \$100K. Second flood in August with \$450K in damage. All roads have been restored, with the only work left to do being 'mitigation' projects to be negotiated with FEMA, VTrans, DEC and Army Corps of Engineers.

Direct response to questions posed by Chair Hardy:

Was the government response effective?

First response was from VTrans. Brian Sanderson and his team from District 3 responded immediately, calling us asking for a damage assessment that day, and then coming on site within a few days to document the damage with specific data points (lengths, depths, amount of fill required, etc) that has been incredibly useful in filing with FEMA. His efforts helped FEMA 'declare' for our county twice.

Congresswoman Balint and others were on site quite soon after the July flood to try to help families get direct help to have their property condemned so they could move from their destroyed house and move, which was successful. They are in their new home as we speak.

Jaron Borg (River Management Engineer--DEC) made several on-site visits to help guide us in planing for upgrading culverts. Very responsive and helpful.

People mentioned above were helpful and responsive, even though they had massive work loads brought about the floods.

FEMA was also responsive, but I have to say that the process to file for funding is tedious and very, very time consuming. As an example, they want to know if large stone riprap placed to stabilize a ditch was stone replacing stone that was there and was washed away, or stone that was added to meet codes and standards. We have to tease that out from the contractors' bills. It has been months, and will be many more, before we get any funding from them.

So inter-agency communications and the process was, all in all, excellent. Only concern is the slow FEMA timeline for reimbursement.

This leads to how the State could help. The Bond Bank funding idea is excellent and we have applied to receive funding from that source. It would be great to have a fund that towns could have access to right away to help pay for events like this. Ripton had funds we could use to pay the bills, but other towns didn't have the money immediately available, so have had to borrow at the current 5% or 6% rate. I estimate our interest costs would have been \$30k if we had had to borrow from a bank.

We have not been able to find a **computer program** that would allow us to input road-damage bills and generate reports that FEMA could use. We think we could create an Access database that would do it, but there really needs to be a Statewide, FEMA friendly way to input flood damage data that generate reports that would make FEMA happy.

**Administrative help** to small towns is an on-going issue. Ripton has our exceedingly competent and hard-working Alison Joseph, who has been taking care of business in town for years. Many towns don't have that kind of experienced and capable help. And, even when they do, the FEMA burden is so extreme that other work can't get done. Anecdotally, Middlebury hired a new roads manager, who has spent "all her time" on FEMA this year. There is an initiative to provide help via Regional Planning, but, as I joked in an email a few days ago, getting help requires filling out an application for a grant, the very thing that towns need help doing. I get that there has to be a way to get the process started, but still....Also anecdotally, I have been told that much grant funding goes begging because towns don't apply for the funding due to lack of administrative help.

**Simplifying the grant applications** would help. I finished the paperwork for a small (10K) grant project yesterday. The request for reimbursement states that 6 photos must be provided: 2 of the project at the beginning, 2 during the install, and 2 showing the finished project. Well, I hadn't noted that requirement for the middle pictures when I did the application, so I thought we might be denied funding. By searching through my photo files I was able to find some pictures I had taken during the install, so we're ok after all, but still. The paperwork we received to say that we had received the grant was 15 pages long. And yes, we are willing to spend hours to acquire \$10K, but there are multiple grant opportunities consuming multiple hours, and then FEMA....

In response to the issue of how to make the government more resilient:

Vermont is more progressive than many States regarding climate change. What concerns me and many of us in Town is that the amount of money required to make the changes to **adapt v. prevent**. We ultimately need to spend orders of magnitude more than we are. For example, locally, our town center is right on the banks of the Middlebury River. We have had water running down Route 125, which is essentially our Main Street. Another 1' of rain, and we might have lost all the buildings along the road. We need either to armor the entire river (cost of \$3-5 million, maybe even more), or purchase land and move or rebuild the Town buildings on a high and dry site, at a cost of, again, \$3-5 million. This is one example. There are many more. We priced out one culvert to accommodate a small semi-seasonal brook at \$60K. We need to armor the Lincoln Road to protect it from the North Branch of the Middlebury River at more than \$1 million, or, perhaps abandon the road. Then there is the winter-long mud season problem. I could expand this list significantly. I don't know where this funding is to come from, but certainly Ripton doesn't have the resources to pay for it.