



OPINION

Chris Campany: Preparing for greater self-reliance in the wake of disaster

There are steps Vermont towns can take to be better prepared regardless of the outcome of future federal declaration requests.

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This commentary is by Chris Campany, of Townshend. Campany is the executive director of the Windham Regional Commission and chair of the Vermont Planning and Development Agencies (VAPDA) Emergency Planning and Resilience Committee.

On Aug. 25, Vermont requested a federal disaster declaration to reimburse municipalities in Caledonia and Essex counties for expenses resulting from **flooding on July 10**. As of this



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writing the response is still pending. Vermonters should pay attention to whether or not a federal disaster declaration is made and, if so, what's included; the result could be an indicator of how changes in the federal approach to disaster declarations will affect the state and what costs municipalities and local taxpayers will be expected to bear when disaster strikes. There are steps towns can take to be better prepared regardless of the outcome of future declaration requests.

Vermont state and local governments are heavily reliant upon federal funding for emergency preparedness, and disaster response and recovery. Nationally, disaster declaration requests that would have been routinely approved have been **slower in coming** or denied. Furthermore, federal funding for mitigation action that has traditionally accompanied federal disaster declarations through the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program **is no longer a given**. Vermont has relied upon this funding for **property buyouts** in floodplains and landslide areas,

improvements to bridges and culverts, protection of floodplains and **flood-proofing of buildings**, among other things.

What can a municipality do to be in the best position to recover from disaster amid federal funding uncertainty?

- Establish a dedicated disaster reserve fund.
- Establish lines of credit before a disaster ever strikes.
- Learn about public financing tools and options for mitigation projects, recovery and rebuilding.
- Develop a capital improvement plan and related budget to identify and prioritize projects. At a minimum this could be a prioritized bulleted list with reasonable cost assumptions.
- Use your town plan and your local hazard mitigation plan to inform your capital improvement planning.
- Give serious consideration to what infrastructure must be rebuilt and what can be abandoned if damaged or destroyed, also known as “strategic abandonment.”

Hopefully federal aid will be forthcoming to the impacted communities in Caledonia and Essex counties. However, each of these actions will serve a municipality well regardless of how the federal policy and funding realm evolves over the coming weeks, months and years.