

**Waterbury Natural Disaster Preparedness Committee**  
**Meeting Minutes**  
**2/26/2024**

**Opening:** The meeting was held in the Steele Community Room, Waterbury Municipal Center. Kane Sweeney called the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m.

**Present:** Kane Sweeney, Select Board representative to the committee, John Malter, Joe Wurtzbacher, Forrest McDonald, Matt Dugan

**Absent:** Ryan Van Tynan

**Approval of Agenda:** Joe motioned to approve agenda Joe; Forrest seconded.  
Vote: Unanimous at 5:33 p.m.

**Approval of Minutes:**

**Business from Previous Meeting:** As this was just the second meeting of the committee, there is no business as yet.

**New Business:** Election of officers: Motion to approve Matt Dugan as Secretary by John; Joe seconded at 5:40.

Amendment limiting term to one year, Motion made by Joe, Matt seconded.

Motion to proceed with the approval as amended made by Joe, John second.  
Vote: Unanimous

Motion to approve John Malter as Chair for a term of one year made by Joe; Forrest seconded. No discussion.  
Vote: Unanimous

At 5:55 p.m., Liz Schlegel joined the meeting for a lessons-learned discussion about flooding in Waterbury, with an emphasis on the two events in 2023. The discussion began with concern about a possible flooding event in the next few days and the ongoing concern about any water-related event in Waterbury in these times.

John informed the committee that there is a town disaster preparedness plan dated April 2023.

What followed was a data dump including the following items:

--Liz informed the committee about the existence and work of CReW (Community Resilience for the greater Waterbury area) and said the committee's long-term goal is a community of people who know how to deal with the river and know how to live in a place where there's a lot of rain.

--We're not ready for the next storm (which could be this week).

--People are not understanding that this will happen again. The long-term goal is for people to know how to deal with the river and the rain.

--Liz mentioned that CReW is focused on a number of homes still in the recovery process as well as keeping tabs on the 100-200 homes that have been affected overall by recent flooding. Liz: "We know who's most at risk right now."

--John asked what if we know what neighboring towns are doing. The CReW is talking with neighboring towns and other authorities about best practices and specific issues, such as Bolton sending flood victims to Waterbury for shelters, which WAB does not have.

--Liz believes the major issue is getting a sufficient number of people involved in the overall flooding effort, particularly recovery, which was a problem in the summer and more so in December.

--But when Nicole Grenier from Stowe Street Café put the plea for help out on social media, there were many responses.

--Liz would like to have a low-cost texting service available for town-specific messaging.

--The bite-sized disaster-response volunteer commitment (of a couple of hours) matters a lot when people don't have a lot of time to give.

--The 2023 flooding taught people how to manage volunteers (e.g., snacks and beverages) and what equipment is needed.

--There was discussion about the importance of personal relationships in regard to obtaining necessary goods and equipment. So, building relationships with other communities is a good idea.

--Liz's wish for the committee is that we're the people looking at the river because it's too much for the town manager to do alone.

--An error made in response to December's flood was not ordering enough dumpsters. This was not a problem for the summer flood, when they were ordered early.

--Tom Drake is still hunting down equipment that was loaned to people during the flood.

--Different equipment is needed for different flood situations, e.g., landslides.

--Roles need to be defined at all levels because it's hard to build a response system when you're in response mode. For example, what kind of person is best suited to a particular household, and what kind of equipment does that home need?

--There's a good summary and needs assessment regarding the July flood but not the December one (the former is available on the town website).

--We need to understand the state's emergency response system better so that we can fill in the gaps better.

--It's not crying wolf to have people ready to take action on short notice, e.g., evacuating, having a go-bag ready, etc. "Preparation" is the key; not necessarily evacuating.

--Liz: "It's not somebody's fault that they live in a floodplain. It's not only their fault that this river behaves very badly much more often than she used to and that doesn't make somebody stupid; you know, I don't hold with that."

--Liz mentioned the upcoming Recovery Fair for mitigation.

--Lack of understanding is an issue. At “every meeting,” people are suggesting berms and dredging as solutions.

--If the town loses the bridge at the top of Stowe Street during a flood, the town is cut off (unless people go over Perry Hill).

--Liz talked repeatedly about building the town’s muscle regarding flood response.

--She expressed great concern about identifying vulnerable households, e.g., the elderly.

--Figuring out what each entity does (CReW, our committee, the town, the state, FEMA, etc.) is important in order to present the strongest possible response.

--Getting clear messages out to as many people as possible is critical.

--Liz suggested Joe talk with Gary “fireman to fireman” to learn about capacities and needs.

--Liz suggests that the town create a town sandbag filling station.

--Kane offered that our committee is based on fire-response committees in Oregon.

--Liz said there was a disaster app called Crisis Cleanup that she had been unaware of during the last flood that confused out-of-state responders because it led them to believe that many properties in Waterbury were still in need of help when they were not.

--The state does not have an adequate way to talk to the towns in a disaster.

--A religious group—possibly the Samaritans—donated a hundred five-gallon buckets with supplies in them, although they were assembled for hurricanes, not floods. Liz and co. repurposed them.

--Prior to the July flood, the town did not have a Facebook page but there is one now to keep people posted, for example, about closed roads. But there are not sufficient communication systems in place for alerting people about flood risk when the waters are rising.

--Only the state can officially declare a road closed; a town cannot. The state knows their response time is a problem but are thinly staffed.

--CReW covers Waterbury, Middlesex, Duxbury, and Bolton.

--Liz: “Vermont Alert” is supposedly somewhat customizable.” (<https://vem.vermont.gov/vtalert>)

--The town knows at what level critical storm drains will back up into the streets.

--But the river gauge isn’t accurate enough; we need more. Kane: Having a gauge on Thatcher Brook would be ideal.

--Emptying basements in flood-prone homes is important but moving electrical and heating systems out of basements is very expensive (\$5000-\$7000 just to move an electrical system, not to house it/enclose it).

--Liz suggested a divide-and-conquer approach for our committee, with each committee member investigating a different sector of flood preparedness and relief.

--March 25 is the committee's next scheduled meeting; location TBD. John asked for the committee's choice of meeting times. Kane informed the committee that Karen Petrovic keeps the meeting rooms calendar.

--Liz suggested that, with CReW, we host Team Rubicon, which does disaster training, as a way to both learn and to engage the greater community in the preparedness effort.

(<https://teamrubiconusa.org/>)

--Organizing first-aid and CPR training was also suggested. Liz felt that volunteers who helped in July would welcome the training. Two possible trainers include Waterbury Ambulance and Andrea Kane from Peacham.

After Liz left at 6:55, the committee talked in general about some of the many points she'd raised. Forrest said that there were many areas of opportunity identified and volunteered to do some thinking/research on areas where we might have a bigger impact. Matt stated that it was important to focus in order to be effective because there are so many possible areas to address that our small committee's energies could quickly be used up. The committee was in agreement about the importance of tackling discrete tasks.

There was a brief discussion about the fact that flooding caused by rain is not the only disaster likely to hit Waterbury. Fires, ice storms, and ice dams are also an issue. John told the committee that, in return for hosting Thanksgiving dinner for flooded Waterbury residents in 1927, on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that event, Waterbury invited residents of Burlington to town to return the favor.

Kane reminded the committee about open meeting laws and how to properly respond to emails.

**Adjournment:** At 7:10, there was a motion from Joe to adjourn the meeting. John seconded.

Vote: Unanimous

**Minutes Submitted By:** Matt Dugan