

Waterbury Natural Disaster Preparedness Committee  
Meeting Minutes  
8/26/2024

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

**Present:** John Malter, Matt Dugan, Bette Lewicke, Stacey Schwarz, Kane Sweeney (Select Board liaison to the committee), CReW members Nora Miller, Liz Schlegel, Tessa Yip, Bill Shepeluk, Mike Dacey

**Absent:** Forrest McDonald

**Approval of Minutes:** Bette moved; Matt seconded. Unanimous approval of minutes at 5:31

**Approval of Agenda:**

**Business from Previous Meeting:** None.

**New Business:**

John started the meeting by asking the committee their thoughts on a paid town position, the disaster response coordinator (DRC) because we can't continue to rely on volunteers.

Kane responded that the town's thinking on the DRC is that it should be a town employee, perhaps an existing one that might take on different responsibilities. The process is ongoing. "Until we start debating the budget, I think we're dead in the water on that."

Liz offered some history. Waterbury had several positions—a paid position on staff plus several Americorps/Visa volunteers to manage grants and rebuilding and tracking federal dollars. "We are going to need a lot of firepower to go research and make good proposals and go get the money."

Liz: The "Tom Drake position" that ran from summer to winter 2023 was about long-term recovery—mucking, connecting residents to programs, managing the equipment, planning.

"We (CReW) are happy to answer how many hours it takes before, during and after, but don't be shy and let the town make it a little role; make it a bigger role. I need the town to go after that (grant) money."

Nora: The DRC and grant writer are distinct roles. The latter "needs to happen as soon as possible because of funding opportunities that are on the table." Likes the idea of the "Tom Drake position" because historical knowledge/experience is critical as the town employee shifts their time over to a disaster response condition.

Nora: The state funds mitigation projects. Twelve of these arose from the special meeting in July.

Liz: These include lowering the corn field, hardening protections for the sewer plant, etc.

Kane: There is not a current deadline for the hiring of the grants manager. The challenge is hiring someone for a part-time position who'd like to be hired full-time/paid more than what is being offered.

Bill: In the wake of Irene, the town had paid people working on flood preparedness in full-time capacities. Why is this not the case now?

Kane: It's not in the budget.

Bill: The flood wasn't in the budget ("I'm not trying to be smart-alecky.").

Kane: Part-time money for a part-time role hasn't attracted a hire yet. So, we (the Select Board) will have to revisit it.

Bill: The only reason the current situation is working at all is that you have several volunteers doing the work of more than one full-time person "and I don't think the volunteers can do that for much longer."

It's hard to find a person who has skills that span several areas, but if you "find a part-time grant-writer, that person could spend part of their time organizing things that CReW and the NDPC are trying to do."

Stacey: How about a consultant and an on-call contract for busy/emergency times?

Liz: "To bring it to the mission of the committee, there is a ginormous need for Waterbury to be prepared and to make changes" and finding the money to be prepared and make necessary changes so each hit becomes less is fundable if you have someone working on it.

Matt: Please elaborate on the grant-writer search.

Mike: Several candidates expressed interest. Tom interviewed a top candidate who was "exceptional."

(The candidate turned down the offer due to compensation.)

Nora: The rate seemed reasonable that this person wanted.

John: Can other communities who are helped by Waterbury help to support this position? "I think we're being penny-wise and pound-foolish."

Bill: It might be easier to get other communities to support such a position at CReW rather than contribute to the town of Waterbury hiring someone. But the grant money should be a town position. When (in the wake of Irene), we got the disaster relief money, we weren't looking to hire a person; we were looking to hire a company and we put out an RFP and we worked with them for a couple of years. Then the town converted to hiring a person (Barb) because it was cheaper. It might be easier to hire a company this time.

Mike: Did the town get hazard mitigation money as a direct result of Barb's efforts in the wake of Irene?

Bill: Absolutely. Several grants.

Nora: There are deadlines. We need this grant writer who, via a reasonable salary, can unlock millions of dollars in aid.

Liz: This isn't sea-level rise. This is manageable to keep our downtown (versus lose a neighborhood at a time) and it has to happen at the community level; there's a lot we can do at that level. We can't turn around and blame people when the community isn't doing its part and I don't think the residents of this community know we are not doing this type of stuff. Because we did it after Irene, people are assuming we are doing it again.

Bill: There's preparedness and there's the immediate response and that's where the biggest grey area is. CReW's mission never was to manage volunteers and do the cleanup.

Kane: The NDPC's disaster response manual speaks to this. That committee is trying to fill in that grey area.

John: We as a committee are still trying to figure it out because there are many moving pieces. "It's a big universe out there."

Nora: A rough calculation of all the volunteer hours the members of CReW put in comes to easily \$40,000 in terms of compensation at \$40/hr. It's taking time away from our day jobs and it's not sustainable.

Matt: The manual calls for a full-time DRC; there's no way around it. But can our committee help with CReW's desire for the town to hire a grant writer.?

John: We can recommend it as a committee.

Bill: We are also talking about a disaster preparedness/response coordinator. Will shift from wearing the preparedness hat to response hat when disaster strikes. The town is going to have to get its arms around this position and pay for it.

Matt: Tessa and Matt will work on support letter to the Select Board for both grants writer and disaster preparedness/response coordinator.

Bill: The NDPC can help prepare the citizens for what they are responsible for, e.g., home dehumidifiers. The sewer and highway departments could use vector trucks. Several years ago, conversation took place among several towns about jointly purchasing one but it died on the vine because in an emergency, everyone would need the vector truck at the same time.

Liz: "I want this town to own a vector truck more than I want anything. I want you to know how amazing it would be."

Mike: There is a difference between home dehumidifiers and what's realistically needed in a disaster, i.e., industrial dehumidifiers.

Kane: We (the Select Board) had a long conversation about what citizens are responsible for.

Liz: We should help the community get there.

Bill: There are at least two ways to ask the public to pay for something. One, you put it in the budget or have a specific ballot item (whether it's a vector truck or a new town position) but talking to the Select Board about putting the items into the budget. We need to educate the community about what it means to be a community and what we need to pay for. So, put it in the budget, and explain what it's there for.

Kane: Representatives from CReW and NDPC can present the case to the Select Board.

Matt: What can we do to move the grant writer forward?

Kane: Tom knows the urgency. The topic needs to stay in the Select Board's sights; otherwise, the board will move on to other things. It will make an agenda appearance once per month until it concludes.

Nora: The town has put in a placeholder grant application on a basic level.

Bill: The grant writer position wasn't in the budget in March and so the fact that the town even advertised the position is a step forward, and so it doesn't have to wait until the next town meeting, so it's a matter of making the town's money fit the position. The budget is already blown due to the flooding.

Matt: How can we help?

Nora: Conversations will help. Tom and Roger know the position needs to be filled.

Kane: The next Select Board meeting is on the 9<sup>th</sup>.

There was general discussion about the July ideation session and the update on those proposed mitigation projects.

Liz: People don't have a way of knowing what projects we're pushing. We need to let the town know what we're doing because there is general anxiety in the town about whether it's safe to live here.

Nora: You can tell by the number of houses that have gone up for sale on Randall Street in the past two weeks.

Matt: Our letter will be addressed to both Tom Leitz and the Select Board.

John: Would it help to have an informational piece in the FPF regarding what we're doing as a committee to give a sense of comfort and confidence to the town?

Nora: This should come from the NDPC because not a lot of people know about it. The piece can let citizens know they can read our minutes.

There was discussion of the process of NDPC members reviewing the manual sequentially and next steps for feedback.

John: Thanks, and appreciation for everyone. Motion to adjourn.

Kane: Will speak to Roger about the grant-writing position to keep it on the Board's radar.

Matt: Seconded the motion.

Vote: Unanimous

**Adjournment:** The meeting adjourned at 6:27.

**Minutes Submitted By:** Matt Dugan