

JOHNSON SELECTBOARD MEETING MINUTES
VERMONT STATE UNIVERSITY – JOHNSON
THE ELLSWORTH ROOM, WILLEY LIBRARY
MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2023

Present: Selectboard members: Beth Foy, Duncan Hastings, Eben Patch, Shayne Spence, Mark Woodward

Others present in person: Thomas Galinat, Jason Whitehill, Eric Osgood, Ken Tourangeau, Chris Watson, Vicki Foster, Roger Marcoux, Gidget Dolan-Dodge, Arjay West, Nat Kinney, Scott Meyer

Others attending via Zoom: Erik Bailey, Lois Frey, Lydia Putvain, Athena Fowler-Shaw, Charles Flaum

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. *Call to Order and Meeting Kick-off*

Beth called the meeting to order at 6:31.

2. *Additions or Adjustments to the Agenda*

Beth added an executive session.

3. *Discussion of the Events and Response to the July 11th Flood*

Beth thanked everyone in attendance for their efforts during the flood. New town administrator Tom Galinat introduced himself. Beth said this meeting is to build out a timeline of emergency response events from Sunday, July 9 through mid to late afternoon on Wednesday, July 12.

Using written records and memory, the group started listing events and times. Eben said on Sunday he was monitoring the weather after receiving alerts about flood risk. As of Sunday night, a flood level of 14 feet was predicted. Early Monday morning he called previous emergency management director Eric Osgood to get guidance. He got contact info for Pomerleau Properties, Merchants Bank, the post office and other places and he called them to let them know they could experience some flooding. He talked to Beth and they agreed the selectboard would need to meet that night. He talked to Erik Bailey, who was the emergency operations coordinator. Around 10:00 am on Monday the National Weather Service changed the prediction to an 18 ft. crest. At some point he talked to the library and to Arjay West. There was a request for sandbags from the fire department.

Roger Marcoux offered to try to get some times from dispatch records.

Around 11:00 am on Monday, Beth texted board members about the meeting that day.

Eben said at 3:05 pm on Monday he talked to Roger, who informed him that water at the bridge in Wolcott was rising. At 3:11 he talked to Brian Raulinaitis and Jason Whitehill about the situation at the library. The selectboard met at 3:15. Eben talked to people at Pomerleau 5 or 6 times between 7:00 am and noon. Jason said Pomerleau's contractor started work at the site around 7:00 am.

Beth left work at 2:00 pm and went and got some food and other supplies because she thought they might not leave the office for 48 hours.

Eben said there was discussion about getting out early notice to people who might be affected. Jason said notice was given to everyone who would be affected based on the predicted crest height. People on River Road East past Waterman Brook and on Lendway Lane were notified that their roads would probably be impassable. People on Wescom Road in the area that was expected to flood were notified.

Eben talked to the SEOC at 4:20. At 4:21, Jason gave a pallet of sandbags to the post office. At 4:51, Jason called to inform him that River Road East was closed at Waterman Brook because of floodwater and the residents were informed.

Erik Bailey said in early afternoon when Eben got the higher crest prediction he had the water and light crew stage vehicles on higher ground. Jason said the public works crew moved all their equipment from the lower storage area. They put some in the upper building and the rest outside. They made up some more sandbags. After the selectboard meeting they went out and monitored roads and handed out notices. Around 4:50 or 5:00 they closed River Road East and shortly after that they closed Lendway Lane.

Around 12:00 am Jason noticed water coming into the lower parking lot where the electric department poles were stored. He called and asked Nate Brigham if he wanted him to start moving them and he called in Ryan to help him move them. By the time they were finishing up about an hour and a half later the water was already a foot and a half deep. Shortly after, they got a call about a rescue.

Beth said the first time she did a website update was 9:12 pm. At that point Lendway Lane and River Road East were closed and the river was expected to peak at 18.2 feet at 2:00 am.

Eben said Lendway Lane was closed at 5:11. Beth said she thinks it was earlier than that. Jason said probably not much earlier.

Mark asked, if water is over Lendway Lane, is it in the lower mobile home park? Jason said no. There is a dip in Lendway Lane where water comes up. Water comes up about the same time at a spot on River Road East about 100 ft. past the Waterman Brook bridge.

Eben said he talked to Jackie Cassino from the state to inform her that Lendway Lane residents who had a need might drive the rail trail if they were stranded. Jason said using the rail trail was one of their backup plans and if they needed to they could also use a 4-wheel trail to Upper French Hill.

Ken said around the time of the selectboard meeting the flood gates were put up at the wastewater plant. Eben and Erik agreed that timing sounds right.

Mark said he is curious about why certain places flooded. It seems like all the flooding on River Road East was from the Lamoille, not Waterman Brook. Jason said in this flood it was the Lamoille that did almost all the damage. Mark said the Gihon didn't do as much damage as in past floods. Jason said on Rocky Road there was only 8 inches of water over the road for about an hour and a half. Mark said the Romeros' place didn't flood.

Duncan said the public works crew did some things like putting in water bars that he thinks were effective. Jason said they went around to all roads Monday morning. Duncan said we didn't have a lot of road damage and he thinks preventive road maintenance is part of the reason.

Beth said at 9:37 she posted that the college was ready to provide a shelter. Eben said he talked to Mike Palagonia Monday morning and a couple of times during the day about a potential need for shelter use. Around 9:00 pm he called and said we would need it. The college was very accommodating in multiple ways. Beth said the college set up an internal meeting around 2:00 pm to discuss logistics for the shelter.

Roger asked if we can keep a list of ideas for the future as they come up. Beth asked people to write down any ideas to be collected later. Duncan said he is more concerned with identifying things we should do differently next time than with establishing the timeline. Eben said he, Beth and others have come up with a list that they can send around.

Eben said he talked to Roger at 5:07. At that point we weren't 100% certain we would have a shelter at the college. Roger had said he would be willing to ask the Hyde Park Fire Department if they were willing to shelter Johnson residents.

Roger said he was in Wolcott in the evening. Wolcott started getting isolated in late afternoon.

Jason asked if Eben knew about the problems they were having in Wolcott. Eben said almost every time he talked to Roger and got an update on what was happening in Wolcott he called Arjay.

Mark asked if any time the people watching what was happening disbelieved the 18 ft. prediction. Eben said at 5:11 pm the river was still at 14.13 feet, so it was still promising that it wouldn't get too high. Roger said he thought it was going to be bad because of the destruction along Route 15 and places where water was over the road where it never had been before. Duncan said at around 3:00 am he thinks they were still calling for a flood level of 18.5 or 19 ft. Shayne said the recorded levels got higher than the projected levels around 2:00 or 3:00 am. Mark said it seems like if Roger in Wolcott was seeing places where flooding had never been that bad we should have trusted that more than the National Weather Service. At what point did people not trust the National Weather Service prediction? Beth said around 2:00 am she noted that the trend line was straight up, indicating the water would keep rising. At the same time Roger was saying Morrisville was flooding and Arjay was reporting problems and saying there were firefighters he wasn't sure could get back to Johnson after providing mutual aid. Mark said if we're 8 hours behind Wolcott and Wolcott is underwater we should know we are in for deep water.

Roger said he couldn't tell us how bad it would get in Johnson, but he thought the leadership in Johnson did a good job of trying to keep up with what was happening. He had not seen the water rise that fast before. Beth said we can only use the data we have. Through the entire event she was watching the levels that were being recorded.

Jason said he is frustrated because if he had known at 8 pm that water levels upstream were like nothing that had ever been seen before and that people were being evacuated he could have gotten more notices out. The village probably would have moved their poles. We probably could have saved more of what was in the lower storage building.

Ken said he kept checking on the sewer treatment plant. At 7:48 that night water was just about to reach the pavement at the plant. Two hours later you couldn't get to the plant from the fire station. The water rose 3 ½ feet in two hours. It was unprecedented. Roger couldn't tell if the Gihon was causing issues for us at the same time. Beth said we did have people telling us the levels of the Gihon throughout the night.

Eben said he will make a note about contacting Jason in the future. He was contacting Arjay but he didn't think about calling Jason.

Jason said at 7:13 pm he sent Ryan and Jacob home. They took town vehicles home with them.

At 8:35 Hogback Road was closed. At 8:54 Jason got a call about a resident who was cleaning ditches with their own tractor on Sinclair Road. He was asked to check it. Beth said just before that she drove by to see the water level near Sinclair. At 9:16 Hunter Road was closed. At 11:34, Arjay, Gidget and Roger came to the emergency operations center. Arjay said he thinks that was when they were starting to realize what was happening upstream was outpacing the predictions. They talked about trying to make contact with high hazard areas. At midnight the fire department went on duty. For the first hour they went around and identified status and hazards. They only had about an hour of that before things progressed. At 12:06 Jason called Eben and said Route 15 was being shut down on the west side of town.

Beth said at one point they actually predicted the river height going down.

Roger said Route 15 was closed in a lot of different areas for a 7 mile stretch. A low spot just below Lamoille Union filled up with water. The sheriff's department posted people there. Water came over the road at Willow Crossing.

Beth said around 11:15 Arjay did a hazard check and she posted that people should check their propane tanks.

Road closure times were discussed.

Eben and Beth went outside around 2:15 or 2:30. The road was already very flooded. The lower parking lot at the municipal building was starting to flood and Beth told Eben that the water was coming up fast and they should check it every 15 minutes. Around 2:45 she went out and the water was at the back tire of her van in the closest parking lot spot. Eben said around 2:30 Erik called someone from the water and light crew about getting a truck moved. At 3:20 Beth posted that Willow Crossing was closed but she thinks it closed earlier. At 3:36 she posted that if residents saw people and lights outside it might be the Johnson Fire Department looking for hazards.

Mark asked if the fire department has a siren by the mobile home park. Duncan said no, but that is a lesson learned. Ken said there is one at the fire department. Duncan said we didn't use it. Is there a plan for using it? Roger said in Hyde Park they used to test their siren every week but people didn't know what to do if they heard it. Duncan said we could have a code, like 3 blasts is a flood. When he was growing up in Woodstock the town had a code and the siren was tested once a month. The code was in the phone book but people don't have phone books anymore. We could send it with the power bills. A lot of people at the shelter said they didn't know there was water in their buildings until they put their foot in it.

Jason said at 1:19 he talked to Brian Raulinaitis. Everything at the library was looking good at that point. Later, sandbags actually broke a window at the library in a spot where they were stacked above where anyone thought the water would reach but there was no plywood over the window.

Eben said the first people arrived at the shelter at 9:31. Duncan said pets were an issue at the shelter.

Ken said around 1:30 or 2:00 am an alarm went off at the sewer plant telling us about 1.2 million gallons of water coming in.

Mark asked what time the power was shut off. Eben said that was not until about 9:00 am the next day.

Ken said the water coming into the sewer plant was probably mostly from the pipe under the bridge on Railroad Street.

Beth said at 3:45 the people in the municipal building left when they realized they had to leave or they wouldn't be able to get out. Before they left they called Rosemary to get the code for the vault and tried to get in but the lock needs a special touch. Eben had to go get Rosemary. Meanwhile, Erik picked up computers. Rosemary opened the vault and Eben and Rosemary got as many books upstairs as they could. Eben took Rosemary home while Beth and Erik got the mobile emergency operations center working. Beth said then people started showing up in droves. Rescues were starting to happen. When Eben was coming back from taking Rosemary home he and Beth talked about calling Eric Osgood and Duncan. Both of them were called.

Eben said the shelter was chaos when he got there. Beth said they were running out of beds. Duncan said people were showing up with pets and we had to make a plan for them. After breakfast the college came up with a plan to put people with children and pets in dorm rooms.

Beth said around 6:00 or 7:00 am on Tuesday she called her mother, Lynda Hill, and talked to Eben about getting towels, clothes and bed linens. Eben said he went home and got socks and towels from his house.

Mark asked who moved people to the shelter. Beth said the sheriff's department, the fire department, the road crew and college vans. Roger said a part-time sheriff's department employee works part time at the college. Roger asked if they had vans and they provided 2 vans.

Jason said the village water and light department was busy the first half of the morning. They started helping the road crew around 9:30. The public works crew assisted with a rescue off River Road West around 4:00 am.

Ken said at 5:01 am water was about 3 feet deep at the 2-story apartment building behind the old ambulance building on Railroad St. At 7:27 it was probably another 2 ½ or 3 feet higher. That would have been the time of the crest.

Tom asked if there is any advantage to having a shelter closer to the flooding area. Eben said the elementary school is the other potential shelter location. Nat said for people without cars it would be very helpful to have a closer shelter but there is nothing available. Roger said if the Gihon floods there could be problems accessing the elementary school. We don't want the EOC to be right in the incident area. Duncan said one reason the shelter at the college worked well was that college was out of session. It would have been harder if college had been in session.

Tom asked if the town needs permission to set up a shelter at the college. Could there be a contract that says it will always be available? Nat said he think the college has a memorandum of understanding with the American Red Cross. The Red Cross is contracted to take over within so many hours. Duncan said at first we couldn't get a response from the Red Cross. Eben said flooding was so widespread across the state that they were stretched thin.

Mark asked if the cell towers at the college are all backed up with generators. If we shut down village electric it shuts down the college. Ken said they can isolate that area. Duncan said the college is on a different circuit. Mark said he thinks Roger should be able to answer the question of whether there is generator backup.

Tom asked the total number of people who came into the shelter. Beth said the highest number in the shelter at one time was just under 30 but people came and went so the total number of people who used it was definitely over 30.

Nat said there was a check-in list but it was hard to read. In the future we need intake forms asking people things like whether they have medical conditions and have their medication.

Vicki Foster said NEMS got a call that someone at the shelter needed lancets. They brought them and were told that the shelter already had a supply. But people staying in the shelter were not aware that they were there. Nat said a few diabetic people didn't have their medication. Some people didn't have mental health medications and didn't even know what they were supposed to be taking. Vicki said one person called NEMS for Tylenol because they use it every night for back pain.

At 5:30 the college was starting to figure out a plan to feed people. Beth said in the future we need to be prepared with water. She happened to have a case in her car but otherwise no one was prepared with water during the emergency. Tom said it sounds like there should be a conversation between the Red Cross and the college about what to have for pre-staging.

Duncan said the Red Cross was not able to respond at first. Beth said they were not able to come until 5:00 pm on Wednesday. Duncan said that situation has never happened before that he remembers. Nat said in the 2019 flood it took a day for them to arrive.

Duncan said we should think about staging blankets or cots. Beth said we need to make sure the college is doing that.

Arjay said he doesn't have the times with him tonight but he thinks the fire station was evacuated about 6:00 or 6:30 in the morning. All first responder vehicles not involved in rescues were moved to Gould Hill. A little more than half of the fire department's emergency responses came after the station was evacuated. He was handling deployments and team assignments out of his pickup. They had trouble keeping track of the times when events ended. They had good records from the time while the office was manned but it became more fragmented when they were working out of vehicles. Handling calls was one overwhelming aspect. He had 107 phone calls on his personal phone that night and he didn't even count the texts. He suggested in the future it would be helpful to preplan a second local method of dispatch.

Roger said the sheriff's department has a dedicated cell phone for emergencies. Maybe the town could do the same thing and assign a volunteer to answer it.

Tom asked if the fire department and the town highway department can talk on the same channel. Jason said public works can switch over to the fire department's channel but they try not to interfere with their operations. The highway department and the fire department were communicating via cell phone during the emergency. Tom asked if a third channel to be used during emergencies would be worthwhile. Jason said he feels it might be overwhelming.

At 6:45 the college got approval to move people to Senators Hall. About 7:45 the college received notice that the village would be shutting off power. At 9:00 am they got word that the sheriff's department was requesting boats to evacuate people and they began gathering spare boats to lend.

Mark asked where people were being evacuated with boats. Jason said on Railroad Street near the library and the Aupperlees' place the water was too high for the public works loader.

Duncan said there were people at the shelter with mental health needs that were not being addressed. There was also a lack of basic supplies like blankets, diapers and formula. Lynda Hill and the volunteers she organized were very helpful in their response.

Beth said in the future we need to think about mental health and social services. The event was very traumatic for everyone. Local county social services came in on Tuesday, but they were impacted too and it was initially hard for them to get here. Nat said the United Way and social service agencies are learning lessons and having similar meetings.

Eric said he was frustrated that they did not have an emergency response team. He tried for most of the day to get hold of someone. He finally had to get Dan Noyes to use his resources. And they still didn't come until Wednesday. There were people dealing with mental health issues to begin with who were affected by the flood and they were requesting their mental health

counselors. Beth said there were also people who did not previously have issues who were in shock. Roger said agencies are still dealing with those people. Vicki said there is one person NEMS is responding to up to 3 times a day. He keeps going back to his home. He got checks from the Red Cross and didn't understand what to do with them and threw them away. He doesn't understand he can't go back into his home. There is no support for the vulnerable population. Is there something we can do so we know about people who can't make decisions on their own and need extra help?

Beth said one thing we did well was that on Wednesday we got together the different social services groups as we were preparing to do the handover to the Red Cross and we made sure each person in the shelter had someone assigned to them.

Nat said on Wednesday morning he went around to survey all the shelter residents. He got information like names, addresses, medical conditions, and animals they had.

At 2:10 on Wednesday North Carolina search and rescue showed up. On Wednesday at 6:00 pm we had the meeting with all social services. By that time 2 people from the Red Cross were here. At 7:00 pm the Red Cross trailers arrived.

Mark asked, at any point did we have to force people to leave their homes? Arjay said there were situations where the fire department told people it was their last opportunity and the fire department would not come back for them. Mark asked if people stayed who shouldn't have. Arjay said when the first warning was given, many people said they would be fine and would stay and then later made multiple calls to 911 and were angry they weren't evacuated first. When people don't want to leave, the fire department is reasonable the first or second time but in the height of the flooding they made it very clear to some people that it was their one opportunity to be rescued.

Mark said he is hearing that some people got out of bed and were surprised by water because they hadn't known their houses were flooding. Vicki said she knows of one person who said the fire department came and said he had to get out but he didn't understand why because it had never flooded before. That person doesn't have the ability to make those decisions. She doesn't know if there is a way to have a better plan for those people in the future. That person was hugely traumatized. Mark said he thinks a lot of people needlessly lost their motor vehicles. Beth said we can ask social service agencies to have a plan for addressing clients they know live in flood plains.

Mark asked when the water peaked. Beth said on Tuesday during the day.

Eben said on Tuesday they spent many hours on the phone trying to get the Red Cross here. Scott said sometimes it is helpful to put in a ticket with the state emergency operations center. Eben said he submitted 10 or 15 tickets just for the Red Cross. Beth said it felt like the state emergency team was 2 days behind us the whole time. Duncan pointed out that they needed to respond statewide. Roger said a lesson we learned during Irene was that each community has to be able to be self-sufficient for 2 or 3 days.

Jason reviewed the timeline for when different roads were opened up.

Ken said by 7:00 all lines were recharged. About 50 customers were without power.

Erik said the EOC should have watch officer log forms.

Mark asked when Route 15 opened back up and Johnson became accessible. Roger said in the
There was more discussion about when different roads reopened.

On July 12 at 2:00 pm Johnson fell below flood stage.

Nat said we need something in our emergency management plan about debris management. Beth suggested we could have a contract in place. Tom said Johnson is getting an intern from UVM and their main focus will be developing a debris management plan in case of flooding. Nat said he would like to talk to them. Tom said one concern we are hearing from residents is that people who took the initiative in the first hours after the flood and took care of debris themselves are not eligible for reimbursement. We need a plan so all residents can be eligible for reimbursement.

Jason said by 4:00 pm on Wednesday all town roads were open.

Beth said Erik Bailey had noted that we gave out Nate Brigham's cell phone number for electric issues. Ken said the village does have a cell phone not assigned to anyone. They started using it after the flooding. They put that number on the website and took Nate's off. It is hard for him to perform tasks when his phone is ringing.

Mark asked if people were getting contact info from the town website. Beth said people were definitely looking at it, but not everyone was. On Wednesday morning we put together a flyer with information on resources, including the town website. Mark said it would make sense to have a way to forward calls from the Johnson town clerk number, since that would be the first number a lot of people would call. Beth said we need a communication plan. Roger said his office can help work on an emergency communications plan. Ken said he, Beth and Eben talked about radios.

Ken said on Wednesday at 6:00 am the flood gates at the sewer treatment plant were taken down

Several people commented on how helpful Johnson Farm and Garden was. Eben said THC Sisters showed up with a trailer full of donations. Duncan said Greg and Dawn Tatro did a lot too.

Duncan said there is still a pallet of wipes on Bobby Hoag's lot. It was agreed that Jason should throw them out.

Beth said at some point we will discuss lessons learned and a revised emergency plan.

Eric Osgood said, with regard to questions about why when the water is at a certain level in one place we aren't notified that it will be a certain level somewhere else, every event is different

and what happens on the Gihon can really affect the overall impact. The National Weather Service, the river gauge and Roger's observations are all good tools but there is still a bit of an art to predicting flood levels. Flooding also depends on what happens with the rain. When the rain stops there is generally about a 6 hour lag until the Lamoille peaks

Beth said one thing we discussed was whether we should be asking people with reservoirs upstream to release water before the event so there is more capacity. Eric said it is possible that they already do that. Duncan said there really needs to be a coordinated planning process throughout the river basin.

4. *Executive Session – Potential Legal Issue*

Beth moved to find an executive session necessary to discuss a potential legal issue as premature public disclosure of the information could put the village at a substantial disadvantage, Eben seconded and the motion was passed.

Eben moved to enter executive session per 1 V.S.A. Section 313(a)(1), for discussion of a potential legal issue, Duncan seconded and the motion was passed at 8:43.

The board came out of executive session at 9:13.

5. *Adjourn*

The meeting was adjourned at 9:14.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths