

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

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

Others: Jason Whitehill, Arjay West, Craig Carpenter, Gidget Dolan-Dodge, Ken Tourangeau, BJ Putvain, Sgt. Chris Watson, Will Jennison, Brian Raulinaitis, Athena Parke

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. Call to Order

Beth called the meeting to order at 6:30.

2. Emergency Declaration for Flood Event

Duncan moved to declare a state of emergency for the Town of Johnson under V.S.A. Title 20 Chapter 1 and to authorize the emergency management director to submit the Local Jurisdiction Request for Emergency Declaration, Mark seconded and the motion was passed

3. Authorize Spending for Flood Event

Jason said he would like to start hauling plant mix from Nadeau's to the town staging area at 6:00 am tomorrow to be prepared for flood-related repairs.

Eben moved and Duncan seconded to authorize flood-related spending as needed. Beth said we do want to be cognizant of cash on hand because of expenses from the previous flood that we have not yet been reimbursed for. **The motion was passed.**

4. Flood Preparation Discussion

Beth asked if anyone present wanted to share thoughts about tonight or tomorrow.

Athena Parke said she is concerned that the village green will quickly fill up with parked cars. It might be helpful to think of somewhere else people can park. Mark said he has been telling his renters go to the elementary school parking lot on College Hill Road. Beth said we should contact the school and get approval.

Arjay West said the fire department has equipment ready to go and staffing available. He asked if there is anything the EOC wants the fire department to be doing or preparing to do. Eben said he can't think of anything at this time. He asked if the fire department has tested the siren since July. Arjay said no. That part of the station isn't usable yet.

Shayne asked if the idea of having the fire department go out and talk to people in previously flooded areas has come up. Eben said he talked to Roger Marcoux about it. Ken Tourangeau and BJ Putvain had recommended it. He wanted to wait until this meeting and look at the models. Flooding is not predicted for River Road West or the mobile home park. Jason has talked to the people on Lendway Lane and gone to River Road East to try to communicate with residents. Eben talked to the resident at the end of Hunter Road. Apparently there is a back way out of there. He doesn't see a need for the fire department to contact residents. Shayne said he would rather be proactive than reactive. He doesn't like the thought of people waking up at night with freezing water coming into their houses.

Mark said he called Fred's today and asked them to secure his propane tanks. Is that happening in the village? Brian Raulinaitis said he saw Fred's working on one and he saw Tony Lehouillier had his moved closer to his barn. People are obviously thinking about it.

Eben said if residents in previously flooded areas are going to be contacted, he would rather have board members do it. Shayne said he thinks it carries a different weight coming from the fire department. He thinks anyone in areas flooded before should get a knock on the door.

Will Jennison said we are going to exceed the crest that was anticipated an hour ago. It is still raining in Wolcott. Beth said the last gauge reading was 14.74 ft, which is a moderate flood level. The peak is predicted to be 15.2 ft. at 7:00 pm. Based on the trend line the water will not stop at that level.

Eben asked if Sgt. Chris Watson went to Wolcott before this meeting. Sgt. Watson said the sheriff's department had someone there about an hour ago who reported that Elmore Mountain Road had water over it and water was starting to approach North Wolcott Road. Mark asked if the river is over the banks in Wolcott. Sgt. Watson said it was not when he was there this afternoon but it was very close. There was some minor field flooding. Gidget Dolan-Dodge said she talked to the chief of the Wolcott fire department half an hour ago and he said they have closed some roads and the water is still rising.

Beth said she saw a lot of snow in Walden and Hardwick yesterday. Is there still a lot of snow on the ground in Hardwick? Sgt. Watson said no. Ken said there is not a lot of snow in Eden either.

BJ said he knows last time we underestimated it. Right now the water at his house is where it was at midnight last time.

Ken said Arjay had written up a possible handout for residents.

Eben asked Arjay's thoughts. Arjay said given the indicators he thinks the flooding will be relatively minor and sheltering in place would be appropriate for most people. He doesn't see a need to move a lot of people. It is more an issue of awareness. He doesn't know if the town has a method like VT Alert to send hourly updates. Eben said using VT Alert is not a bad idea. Arjay said sometimes having people out knocking on doors can cause chaos. He is not sure there is a large benefit to going door-to-door.

Duncan said the media is putting the flood risk out there. It would be hard for anyone not to be aware of it. Shayne said during the July flood even though the media was talking about it there were people who did not know it was coming and were in their homes at 2:00 am with floodwater coming in. He suggests making sure people have the information and leaving it up to them what they do.

Ken said his concern was people with mental health issues or handicapped people. But many of those people are still displaced from the last flood. He felt the way Shayne does earlier but now he feels we should not put the fear back into everyone unless water levels are still going up in another hour or two.

Beth said her opinion is that we haven't seen water close enough to any homes yet. She is not saying we won't but she tends to agree with Ken. She is concerned for the people who lived through the last event but she is not sure knocking on their door will help them. If we think people are in imminent danger we will check on them.

Arjay said the fire department has been coordinating with the sheriff's department to check high hazard areas. People have been patrolling throughout the afternoon and evening. Sgt. Watson said the sheriff's department has three people out right now checking areas that typically flood. They will continue to do that until it is not needed and they will call in more resources if they need to.

BJ asked in the last flood how long it took before people realized it was going to be higher than predicted. Beth said an 11:00 peak was predicted and at 11:00 the water was above what was predicted and the trend line was literally straight up. That was when they realized we were in trouble. The trend line now is not a flattening curve but it is also not still straight up. It is starting to curve a little. BJ said we can warn people earlier or we can wait and potentially end up saying we should have done it earlier. He tends to agree with Shayne. The water is getting close to his house.

Craig Carpenter said he understands what Shayne is saying. There is value to having the knowledge out there. The fire dept will do what the EOC asks. That is why they asked for this meeting to happen at 5:00 instead of 6:30, so they could be out knocking on doors at 6:00 instead of at 8:00 or 9:00.

Brian said he thinks giving people information about the flood levels observed would not incite panic. He thinks it would comfort people to know the EOC was on top of the situation. The resources required to save someone by boat are greater than the resources needed to notify people.

Eben said the EOC has put in many hours leading up to this storm, looking at models, getting in touch with the National Weather Service, etc.

Brian said the level is 15.1 now and the forecast a few hours ago was 15.2. We have to throw that number out.

Athena said she knows some people are already panicking.

Eben said he likes the VT Alert idea. He can call WLVB and have them do an announcement.

Mark said seems like there ought to be a stake in Wolcott and if water reaches that stake someone calls us because we know if it reaches that point that means a certain flood level in Johnson. Someone else commented that there should be a gauge there. Mark agreed. He thinks there should be arrangements for upstream communities to notify downstream communities of flood conditions. Beth asked Duncan to mention that to LCPC at the meeting coming up.

Duncan said when we notified people in the last flood we had an emergency shelter open so they had a place to go. He doesn't think we are planning to open a shelter this time. He is not opposed to providing notice to people but he is not sure how much value there would be in it.

Jason said water is a foot deep now over Rocky Road. Ken said it's not just the Lamoille this time. Paying attention to Wolcott won't always save us. He agrees that VT Alert is probably the best way to notify people.

Mark said he has called or texted all his renters to tell them to park their cars somewhere else tonight. A lot of them are new to the area and wouldn't have known they were living in an area that could potentially flood.

Arjay said the fire department has a list of high hazard areas. It would probably take about 2 hours to contact people in those areas. If the EOC decides to have them do that he strongly recommends having a predetermined statement to give out. He suggests telling people what water level we are expecting and how that compares to the July flood. If the fire department is directed to do that, can they submit the time for reimbursement since it is not a traditional 911 call? Shayne said it could be potentially be reimbursable if there were damage and he thinks it would be worth the expense even if the town is not able to get reimbursed for the cost.

BJ said he would be happy with high risk areas having advance notice.

Beth said Wolcott just opened their shelter. We are set up to open a shelter if we need to. Eben said we have a space to do it and the Red Cross has been put on alert that we may open a shelter. Beth said United Way has also been notified. Craig said he thinks if the fire department is going to knock on doors we need to have a shelter open.

Ken suggested doing as Arjay suggested and notifying people in known problem areas. Eben said Arjay had previously discussed people sheltering in place. He hears Craig's concern about needing to have a shelter open if we are going to knock on doors. That makes sense.

Duncan said he thinks we should be cautious about putting out information about expected flood levels that people may rely on when it could turn out to be wrong. Arjay said he doesn't disagree. The EOC should predetermine the statement so everyone is saying the same thing. Beth suggested a statement like: "River levels are rising and we are currently already flooding. Please take precautions. Do what is best for you and your family. If you are seeking shelter please call this number." And we can give the town office number which will ring to an emergency phone. Shayne suggested also directing people to somewhere they can find updated information.

Eben said he would rather confer a little more before deciding to notify people. He will probably consult Eric Osgood. If Eric recommends it, there will be a request to the fire department with the understanding that the fire department can bill EOC. He said Craig is right about the timing of this meeting but he had a scheduling conflict and could not be here at 5:00.

Beth said regardless of what happens with notifications we can put out VT Alerts regularly and we should. Mark said we should also update the town website. Beth said she is already doing that.

5. RFP for Municipal Building and Library

Shayne moved to authorize Duncan Hastings and Tom Galinat to review the RFP for the municipal building and the library and to authorize Duncan or Tom to sign it, Mark seconded and the motion was passed.

Duncan said if anyone has comments on the RFP they should give them to him and Tom so they can incorporate them into the final document.

6. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 7:16.