

# Recovery, Resilience and the Future of Montpelier

## Breakout Notes from September 7, 2023

*On September 7<sup>th</sup> participants broke into forums to discuss the framework of the Montpelier Commission for Recovery and Resilience and the five highest priorities for action identified by the voting process in this meeting. Below are the raw notes from these discussions for consideration by community members and the members of the nascent Commission, but also for volunteer members of future working groups convened by the Commission to advance these priorities in action.*

### Montpelier Commission for Recovery and Resilience

It will be important to have some members with lived experience of the flood, someone impacted in a substantial way

Concern expressed that the forum was to decide how commission would operate but it already seems put together? Discussion of how the draft was pulled together because time is of essence and because organizers heard the need clearly from participants.

The state the largest landowner; are they going to be involved? Yes, we've put a call in to Buildings and General Services and have been in touch with the Agencies of Commerce and Natural Resources.

Where is the Regional Planning Commission, why not here and voice not loud? There have been discussions about an RPC rep; their director is here tonight and they are paying attention.

It's critical to some that the new commission not be beholden to the city, not being closely tied or controlled by city government; the commission needs to have ability to identify where bureaucratic road blocks are and act.

Most commission members will be outside city government and the Commission will be independent. Likewise, Montpelier Alive and the Montpelier Foundation, want to find balance point and will not be dominant...it will be made up of citizens of the city with expertise.

I like the independence as well as people's connections for collaboration but what authority do they have? This is a partnership/voice/governance structure to raise big ideas, have a loud voice and to coordinate and facilitate moving ideas ahead.

What is relationship to city/state, need to define how group gets to have a voice with city council, not want to be just an advocacy group. The City looking for guidance and advice to set direction and evaluate opportunities and move the ball.

Don't make the Commission be too big and cumbersome; are there any models (such as health care spoke and hub structure? Initiative in Waterbury was mentioned.

Size of commission? 12 to 18 members envisioned.

Montpelier is downtown for Central Vermont so need voice of surrounding communities.

Will there be stipends to serve, ie to help with barriers for participation such as childcare? This has come up; at this point there is an agreement among the partners to work to raise funds to make this happen, but there are no funds in hand—it's a work in progress. Good to have this point raised now.

Major dollars will be needed for recovery and resiliency; the idea was shared of the City passing bonds for a pool to lend funding.

Youth members are needed!

The Commission can coordinate and cooperate with city and will have ability to go to State/Fed to advocate for funding.

Need to coordinate so a lot of small groups don't dilute energy. The Commission can be a convening center and can support groups.

What is best way to avoid mission creep or inaction? Clear vision, strong leadership and members and laser-like focus.

Is there a role for volunteers? Yes, this effort will be a huge lift and will need many willing to put in time.

The Commission needs to represent the community, it will be valuable to have people with perspectives from different parts of the community, people need to see themselves in Commission.

There will be competing timelines, and need to prioritize actions; the Commission can make recommendations on how to approach timing/prioritization.

Want Commission to be in a position to implement, get done what is emerging, be a driver to pressure City to take action. There is urgency, decisions being made now.

Need to think beyond what City does well and what else is needed.

## **Priorities for Action**

- 1. A Regional Commission Should be Convened to Develop a Plan for Flood Prevention**

We need to find out what already exists for riparian management. 'Who' is going to do this work? - there is a need for commitment.

One structure that already exists is Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission (CVRPC); then there is the group, Friends of the Winooski. These entities that support municipalities and land use policies, transportation, adaptation, energy, climate change.

What capacity does the Regional Planning Commission have? What needs to change?

We need to evaluate the needs of the community. The CVRPC can host and collaborate with experts including Vermont Emergency Management (VEM).

This doesn't mean others can't be involved

CVRPC are already meeting frequently about these events and the Vermont River Conservancy - is doing a lot of this work already.

It's important to quantify the challenges from rain event and ice event flooding, engage climatologists, hydrologists; study projections for future scenarios and the potential for greatest water/rain event and river activity.

This effort needs to connect with other municipalities, upstream and downstream and take a holistic look at the watershed, what are the avenues for getting involved with CVRPC or other organizations.

We should develop a quick list of things that residents/homeowners can do in their own properties to help mitigate water flow.

Let's solicit feedback on strategies for slowing water flow.

What role does the Dog River play, what's the stone embankment that was built there, where did it come from? (Casella)

Watershed maps would be great to look at - this exists already, how do we see them? Who is already doing this work? Who are the experts? Vermont EPSCORE program (national science program) could be helpful to engage with: St. Michaels, Middlebury, Dartmouth, all have been studying watershed. Can we bring those folks in to help us prioritize and guide? EPSCORE did recent studies in resilience in the Champlain Basin.

Norwich University is also a resource: It has engagement programs, engineering programs, on the ground learning.

Where are sources of information? We need to take a look at soils and forests, saturation, water table.

How do we engage youth? Montpelier Alive is mtg. with MHS to get students involved and the River Conservancy works with youth as well. North Branch Nature Center engages with youth,

most recently in a film project that can be seen on their website. It will be important to keep people engaged.

How do we size the scale of the problem: Can EPSCORE (or others) design a plan to know what the worst case scenario is, for flooding, water rise and flow, rainfall? Can they look at a picture of the whole watershed: find the Focal area? The Functioning Flood Plain Initiative of Friends of the Winooski is already doing that. The Department of Public Works thinks that the City needs to be at the table to inform groups what is already happening.

How do we elaborate on what we are currently doing? We need to find a structure of communication to help community know what's happening. A hot spot area response plan already exists with the City, they implemented that during this emergency. Does the community know this?

What do we need to get this group going?

Somebody or list-maker to take lead on listing talent we have, and what they are doing. This could exist as a spreadsheet: Includes assets that exists, contact info, skillset. Are there other ways we can share info besides meetings? We should think creatively about how we share information across entities. Examples: Virtual participation, consider accessibility. We will need volunteers to complete the work. Volunteer brigades could be integrated into studies, implementing research efforts, etc. NBNC could offer space to meet and study

Is funding necessary? Funding an administrative assistant might be necessary. The burden shouldn't lie completely on the shoulders of a volunteer leader. There may be a climate resiliency bill conversation (funding, planning and implementation) at the State level already: Citizens should listen in on those conversations.

There is a need for short term and long-term action.

It will be crucial to find the political and societal will to implement. To advance from ecological design: the answer is within the environment, relationships. What can we do to restore relationships (meaning connectivity, ecological connectivity). Interconnectedness is about our relationships. Keeping the conversations going is critical to getting anything done.

## **2. Invest in an Adaptive Downtown**

Actions that we can take: Let's define what we mean by an adaptive downtown: what are the threats we face, etc. Find experts to identify what we need to be adaptive.

One of the major threats is water. An elevated downtown is the ideal vision, but how do we make it a reality. Leaving downtown where it is and allow the river to go where it wants. Ex: eliminating basements and building stilts to move businesses to the second floor.

It's crucial that we get help for the businesses downtown to build shelves and protect buildings. Work on the spaces we have now.

Everywhere we've got parking lots: we could have green stormwater reservoirs. The bike path to capture stormwater. Repurpose parking space and reutilize impervious areas.

There are tried and true methodologies for building adaptive downtowns. Come up with short- and long-term solutions for floodproofing. o Hardening buildings against floodwaters, such as filling in basements and building floodgates.

If there were more parking garages, we would have less impervious space.

Address mitigation efforts and transition off of fossil fuels in the recovery process. Address the root cause of the problem.

So much of business inventory was being stored in basements: can city and business owners come up with an alternative storage system on higher ground? This would be a shared resource.

Creating shelves—think of buildings in the south that close windows. Make these moveable and easily deployable.

Rethinking our school and building outside direct floodplain.

Concentrate new housing outside of the floodplain. Keeping people safe, especially during winter months, and allow more dense building structures. Improve walkability in the downtown area.

Broaden our thoughts on what we mean by adaptive.

Basements need to be off limits and filled in with sand. Think about actions we can take in the existing spaces downtown. These actions require collaboration and investment—how do you create the funding structure that enables businesses to adapt?

Information and funding to deploy these actions. There needs to be a think tank and a money bank to make these decisions. Think about the youth and investing in their future. That means creating resources that are flood resilient. Creating a civic center for youth and programming that is flood resilient.

What would business owners need to feel confident to build and invest in downtown Montpelier? We're not the only city that has flooded—we need to look at and learn from best practices from other cities in US and around the world.

Let's be clear that we are preserving our downtown right where it should be. "Short term" can we define what it means. Consensus is within the space of a year. Climate mitigation is the long-term vision. Resources we need to take those actions forward. Defining not just individual businesses, but collectively how we take action.

We need to work with BGS to identify those areas downtown that are most at risk and private property owners should collaborate with business owners.

It takes more resources to retrofit buildings than build new.

Montpelier will need to work with VT state government and regional governments on watershed management and engage experts in resilience engineering.

### **3. Raise State, Federal, and Philanthropic Dollars Funds for Recovery and Resilience**

What first Steps should be taken in advancing action?

Lots of resources already exist; how do we get people engaged in those processes? (RPCs, AOT, Montpelier organizations listed as examples). How do they communicate better? Agencies need to do a better job communicating offerings (currently offer lots of information that is difficult to digest) but the public also needs to read and engage with the available information. Both parties are currently falling short of the goal.

Potential Solution

FPF: local source of communication not used by state agencies, move resource conversations to those spaces where we know communities are actively engaged.

Big businesses are lacking funding to reopen and stay open. Smaller businesses seem to be having an “easier” time.

Two different issues; what businesses need now to reopen vs. what businesses have lost by being closed in summer and fall. The income from summer and fall carries businesses through the slower months and now they are reopening in the slowest season. Some businesses are worried about taking on SBA loans and not being able to make the payments. Small businesses operate on small profit margins, taking on debt is not always a possibility. Key downtown businesses (both large and small) may not survive the next 12 months without substantial help.

Bigger businesses have formed an advocacy group and are putting together “ask,” but don’t know what will happen. If flooding keeps happening people won’t rebuild. Funding for now (rebuilding and economic losses) vs. future (flood mitigation improvements).

Businesses really need to articulate what they’ve lost and what they need and the community needs to advocate for the businesses.

Business owners confronting issues with bureaucracy, issues with paperwork, etc.

Confronting too little, too late situation. If we don’t do something bold we could lose a lot of the downtown businesses. Call for a special Legislative session with support of state

representatives from the communities impacted by the July flooding. A special session would allow the treasurer to authorize debt for the collective cost of near-term recovery. Exchange should be a payback mechanism; what's the big number, what's the term on the debt, amortization schedule, contributions, etc. May result in something like a special assessment district for property owners or a local tax option. It's on the legislators to lead the charge and get colleagues to pay attention. Cannot wait on the Feds; there are too many climate crises happening and FEMA's budget is stretched.

Special session: Legislature needs to back and get to work. Communities should collectively put pressure on them to make that happen. Large percentage of Central Vermonters think the Governor is doing a great job with the flood response, but communities are not getting what they need. How can you transfer that dissatisfaction into pressure and a better response?

How do building owners/businesses navigate grant opportunities?

Navigators (like with Obamacare) help you fill out applications in real-time to help prepare and pre-approve some portion of the request Special Session- Emergency board does meet during the "off" session and has the authority to move money around (EV special program one example). Don't necessarily have to have a special session to make progress. City has a lobbyist; somebody needs to be in the room and advocate for the City's needs. Maybe we need another one?

Lobbyist(s) should have a list of residents who can show up during important meetings/discussions and advocate for flood response. Put pressure on at the right time.

The public relations piece is really missing. We've done a great job joining together as a community but have almost done too good of a job rallying and the outside world is forgetting about the crisis. PR needs to lift the story beyond local and state levels; storytelling is very powerful.

During COVID we had a weekly address from the Governor and Health Commissioner; no regular communications on this emergency. Weekly addresses provided an opportunity to ask questions and put pressure on responses.

Flood insurance: FEMA for hazard mitigation and flood mitigation: who goes after that money? City, State, Commission? Who is/are the eligible applicant(s) for the available funding?

Do we have a clear sense of the big ask? What is actually needed? What's the number when you're talking to foundations, funders, etc.? That number is in process, but may not be cohesive/comprehensive. SBA might have a ballpark for businesses. FEMA would have public assistance value and individual assistance value. Businesses putting together their own number too.

Recovery amount for Irene? How does this compare? (Note: State just closed out last grants from Irene, this is a very long road ahead).

What Resources will we need?

Currently standing up commission which will take ideas and prioritize them. Attendees need to sign up to be informed about the effort and when you see an opportunity, be available to make a difference.

Legislative committee schedules go up on Fridays for the next week. Normally an illusion of public input, but need to hold committees accountable.

Should the Commission hire a lobbyist so there is someone keeping track of these issues? The City has one, but need to bump up efforts. There are downtown groups and businesses that have lobbyists that could be deployed because this type of work is on mission for those organizations.

Coordinate potential lobbyists from existing organizations and hire additional lobbyist(s) if needed.

#### **4. Protect the Wastewater System**

Provide information in layman's term to the public of the system, disinformation about actions not taken. Current update and planning initiatives.

The Plant didn't flood and operated as intended. They were still releasing untreated water – what is the problem we are trying to solve? Taxpayers spent a ton of money to upgrade. We didn't flood, but came close. Collection system impacted from high velocity flow that cleaned out all the pipes which dumped all the silt at the plant. Still working to clean out silt in the tanks currently. A catastrophic flood would be water coming up through the pipe from the river and backed up into the electrical system. 10 million of gallons a day during flood while capacity is 4 million.

What about the boil water notice? It was done as a precaution because of possible water seeping into pipes, not from pipes bursting. Done as a precaution.

Are their potential mitigation strategies like dog river fields to become floodplain?

Remembers going on a tour of the plant years ago, very educational. A good tool to educate taxpayers of the system and how it works. Disposable wipes were clogging up the system and people didn't know about until they went on the tour. Believes that the fields could be restored floodplain. Tree board could help plant trees and vegetation.

How do other cities around the state mitigate flooding? Other models that work? We need to promote educational tools to inform residents of the system. Elementary School education of the system, start early. The city already provides notices, website, social media, but wastewater is not a topic that drives a lot of community engagement.



How long will it take to separate the rest of the CSO system? About 15-20 years. One pipe at a time. Expensive

What resources will be needed for the commission? Do we need a state of the state or risk assessment? When we did the last upgrade, evaluated all equipment on flood proofing? Would want to look at that work in reviewing a risk assessment. What about looking at more settling ponds? Can we remove concrete and replace with green infrastructure?

Through HMPG to do scoping project on elevating the roadway to act as a natural levee. This is already in the works. If we are raising up the road to act as a levee, does it cause worse flooding downstream? Elevating the roadway would protect public works vehicles and equipment and wouldn't take away that much floodplain. The engineer could look at impact downstream.

Are there properties we can buyout that would allow for more floodplain storage? It would be good to identify them.

It sounds like actions are being taken already to help mitigate through risk assessment, scoping study for elevating the roadway, seems like the plant itself is operating correctly. What is the contingency plan? How can we be helpful if already underway?

The plant provides a regional service, many municipalities and wastewater servicers bring waste to be treated from around the greater central Vermont area.

What about onsite stormwater systems, what if 8-9" of rain falls in one storm, is there something else more needed? If you had a big stormwater drain that goes to the river, could you get rid of excess

water? Potentially, some kind of valve to flip so water would have to be diverted to the river; this is regulated by the state.

What are other cities doing? Barre, Waterbury? Waterbury was not impacted as much as Irene.

Takeaways for further inquiry: Dog river road as a levee, flood gates to protect equipment, possible elevation, where can additional green spaces slow the flow of stormwater with added bonus of filtering before heading to the river, back flow preventers, how to reduce impervious surfaces (State parking lots) for greater absorption of stormwater, more educational opportunities for residents to learn about wastewater operations, how do we learn from other municipalities of what they are doing/strategies.

## **5. Improve Preparedness Communications and Disaster Alert Systems**

Montpelier should advance the accessibility of preparedness information and disaster notifications. A process should be developed to assess and improve how communications connected with seniors, people with disabilities, unhoused people, and tenants. Notifications

and alerts should include more geo-targeted information with more specific information about what action people need to take.

Montpelier could also improve broad notification systems for different types of events using a siren, local radio, and mobilizing a volunteer network for in-person communications to the most vulnerable.

We should encourage and educate on how to sign up for VT-Alert regularly (send out in water bill, posters, dropped in mailboxes) and make City preparedness and recovery plans more broadly known and available.

What first steps should be taken by the committee in advancing this action? What resources will we need?

Educate the public about electrical shutoff and other basic preparedness steps: People didn't know how to turn off their electricity or what to do next. Public education should be provided on these and other basic steps to protect ourselves.

Make reverse 911 calls to every phone number in the city: This was suggested, but it was clarified by City representatives that the dispatch does not have this capability. If residents have signed up for VT Alert, the City can send out alerts citywide by text, email, and phone—but you have to have signed up for this service to get the alerts.

Deploy volunteers and alternative communication systems to meet diverse community needs: Traditional disaster communication methods (including VT Alert) may not work for people who don't have internet or phones, who are unhoused, who have physical and intellectual disabilities, who speak languages other than English, and others. We need volunteers walking door to door and other alternative systems to share information in ways that work for all community members.

A first step could be to identify the populations who don't have access to the traditional system.

Restart the CAN initiative: The CAN infrastructure and email lists still exist, and it would be relatively easy to use them to stand up a volunteer brigade that could be deployed for neighborhood needs before, during, and after disasters, like cleaning out storm drains.

Use the school notification system: The school system is able to contact all enrolled families and could use that capability during a disaster.

Provide feedback on VT Alert: Make it easier to sign up for and create levels of warnings so

people know how dire they are (i.e. red alert instead of flood warning). Make sure warnings work for all users (i.e. are captioned, offered in multiple languages).

Expand the use of social media: Use all platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, City website (there is a Notify Me function), Front Porch Forum, ORCA media.

Conduct disaster preparedness drills: Provide pre-packaged disaster preparedness drills that businesses and organizations in downtown Montpelier can practice with their staff once/year.

Interpret the data for users: Businesses were receiving data/information but didn't know what it meant for them. A more cohesive interpretation would be helpful. Could do things ahead of time, like paint blue lines around town so we can let people know "this is going to be a light blue flood," etc.

Determine whether to provide general information or more specific direction: Is the public expecting the City to tell private operations what to do, or to provide information and let them decide? The City has limited bandwidth during events like this.

Prepare for multiple types of disasters, including power outages: Floods are not the only type of disaster that could strike our community. Losing electricity would make all our communication more difficult.

What is the governance structure needed to make progress on these steps?

The City will have a big role in these items.

Language access needs: We already know what languages kids speak at home, that are spoken around Montpelier. We need to use that knowledge before and during disasters. City officials used the language line service a lot.

People on the ground: We need people on the ground who have lived experience, from the deaf community, people with disabilities, who speak multiple languages, and more.

Informal neighborhood networks: Know your neighbors before disasters strike, know their needs, help the people you know. Organize events like block parties to strengthen those ties.

Surveys: How would you like to be notified in a disaster? Could refresh the information every couple years.

Suggestion: The Commission should form an advisory group to take these ideas and move them

forward. Ultimately this rolls up into the emergency response plan. In doing so it's necessary to consider representation: We'd need representation from the physical disability, deaf, and other communities in order to understand needs.