



*America's Small Town Capital*

## **Flood and Follow-Up**

*By William Fraser, City Manager*

*Month day, 2023*

As we all painfully know, Montpelier suffered a major flood on July 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>. The Winooski River reached its second-highest recorded levels ever, below only the historic 1927 flood which devastated much of Vermont. Our downtown was filled with flood water far exceeding that of the 1992 Ice Jam flood, the May 2011 flash flood, or Tropical Storm Irene in August of 2011. Commercial buildings and business spaces had major damage, many homes experienced basement flooding or worse. This was truly the 100-year flood.

**Pre-Flood Preparation:** Before the storm really began, City officials began making preparations. This included opening our Emergency Operations Center (EOC), calling in additional public safety staff, identifying EOC shifts, sending non-emergency staff home before roads washed out, meeting with Montpelier Alive about post-flood volunteer clean-up efforts, and establishing communication protocols.

The Fire Department pre-positioned vehicles and staff in different parts of the City in order to react to emergency calls without being blocked by flood waters. We connected with the City of Barre and the Red Cross about their plans for a regional shelter at the Barre Auditorium. Finally, we participated in the first of many regular state-wide briefings about the situation.

**During the Flood:** In late afternoon as rain was falling and rivers rising, the EOC was fully activated. The EOC consists of key command staff who monitor the emergency, make decisions about resources, issue public information and updates, and coordinate activities of all city departments. EOC staff were in regular contact with the State of Vermont EOC (SEOC) and the National Weather Service as well as fielding calls and communications from residents and other agencies. Police, Fire, and Public Works staff regularly checked in providing status reports from around the city.

After midnight, we learned that the City of Barre was losing their dispatching capabilities due to flooding. Fortunately, because of work done in recent years to strengthen regional capacity the two cities now have compatible equipment, and training, and are technologically linked. Barre was able to send staff and computers to Montpelier and continue their emergency dispatching during the crisis. By three in the morning, the situation became more exacerbated when the Montpelier Police Station began taking on water in the basement and potentially compromising the dispatch systems for both cities.

The EOC made the decision to move the now combined dispatch center as well as the EOC itself to the Water Treatment Plant on high ground in Berlin. This possible scenario and alternate location had been previously identified in the city's Emergency Management Plan. At

approximately 4:00 AM, this move was successfully made with neither Montpelier nor Barre missing a single dispatch call in the process.

During this same time frame, the EOC received information about the potential for the Wrightsville dam to overflow which would cause much more severe flooding. We spoke with the head of the Vermont Dam Safety program who was literally standing on top of the Waterbury Dam in the rain monitoring the situation there. He provided as much information as possible and called out another person to monitor Wrightsville.

We knew we needed to tell the public about the potential risk but also realized that we had incomplete information (such as flood inundation maps). We chose to release what we knew and relied on the Dam Safety staff for additional updates. We posted that message as we were walking out of the Police Station to move to the Treatment Plant.

**Assessing the Mess:** As daylight broke, EOC staffers went downtown to view the situation. After the early morning reconnaissance, we changed shifts at the EOC so that people up all night could get some sleep and reinforcements could take over. Key activities during this time were public communication, talking with news media, and maintaining safety in a chaotic environment. We also understood from the SEOC that many communities in Vermont were dealing with their own versions of this disaster so that specialized resources like the National Guard would be strategically utilized and not concentrated in any one community. We quickly decided that we would provide public updates every two hours.

**Follow Up Response:** We deployed the entire Parks Department to manage the volunteer and clean up operation. They got fantastic assistance from volunteer Peter Walke and Montpelier Alive Director Katie Trautz. For nearly a month, the Parks staff operated the “Hub” near Shaw’s. Parks Department summer staff from the Montpelier Youth Conservation Corps was everywhere. The Montpelier community turned out in droves to help their beloved downtown. City staff, with help from others, coordinated this effort and made the connections between volunteers and those requesting assistance.

After the flood water receded, Public Works began immediately scraping up mud and sweeping streets. At our request, the City of South Burlington provided equipment and personnel. The crews worked diligently to get the initial layers of muck off the streets which was followed by a dedicated crew of volunteer hand sweepers.

The Mayor, Police Chief, Assistant City Manager and I visited downtown businesses to see their damage and hear their concerns. Our team quickly understood that people needed to clear large amounts of flood damaged debris out of their basements and buildings. We immediately decided to allow people to place this debris along the street for the city to remove.

We began removing this material with city staff and equipment. It became clear that this task was beyond our capacity and we made contact with a large scale disaster debris removal company. Fortunately, the State chose to contract with this company for all municipal debris removal which relieved the financial burden for towns and cities. Montpelier was the first city in the state to have this clean-up performed.

The City also mobilized a team of seven state inspectors along with our own Building Inspector. These people were on the ground in Montpelier immediately after the flood going through buildings to check for safety and clear the way for restored power when possible. No other city had this kind of inspection response.

**City Operations:** While all this was happening, the City government did not have a stable place to operate. City Hall sustained a significant amount of damage as did the Fire Department and Police Department basements.

We kept key operations at the Water Plant while setting up the Planning & Development offices Finance Department offices, the City Clerk's office, Community Justice Center and Montpelier Alive all at the Senior Center on Barre Street as per our Emergency Management Plan. Public Works offices were relocated to the DPW facility on Dog River Road. The City Manager's office, the Assessor's Office, and the City Clerk himself were able to remain in City Hall but, with the elevator damaged, are not fully accessible to the public.

Many city files were damaged and, in some cases, destroyed. With help from the State Archives Office, we identified key files to save if possible and have had them frozen which is the first process for restoration and cleaning.

**Moving Forward:** Obviously, there is a great deal more to do in both the short and long term. The Montpelier Foundation and Montpelier Alive have jointly established the Montpelier Strong Fund to accept donations to help with the city's economic recovery. Those two organizations have also joined with the City to sponsor a series of Community Discussions. The first was held on August 10<sup>th</sup> and the second on August 22<sup>nd</sup>. The date for the third session has not been established. Big, difficult decisions about how to plan for the future loom ahead.

The City has created an internal Rebuild Team. This team will look at planning for City Hall, updating emergency plans based on this event, assisting the community revitalization efforts, grant funding, and other specific tasks which need close attention.

Montpelier residents and volunteers all showed what our community is made of. Our business owners have been amazing even while living through their worst nightmare. Our hearts go out to them and to all who have lost their homes or had their residences severely compromised. Our wonderful local organizations, particularly Montpelier Alive and the Montpelier Foundation, have stepped up to the challenge. I appreciate the incredibly hard work done by our dedicated city employees. Thank you to all.

Thank you for reading this article and for your interest in Montpelier city government. As always please contact me at 802-223-9502 or [wfraser@montpelier-vt.org](mailto:wfraser@montpelier-vt.org) with questions or comments.