



America's Small Town Capital

Post-Flood Communications Improvements

By William Fraser, City Manager, and Evelyn Prim, Communications Coordinator

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People throughout the community have been working diligently to re-open businesses, repair homes, alter buildings, and consider longer-term challenges. The City is currently working with FEMA to address 35-45 municipal rebuild “projects” representing approximately \$10.5 million in repairs. The biggest of these is the restoration of City Hall, the Fire Station, and the Police Station back to full function.

City staff are also conducting an “after action” review. This is an evaluation of our efforts - what went well and where we could improve. This after-action helps us identify ways to make positive changes for future emergencies. One key area we’re focusing on is public communications.

The City’s Crisis Communications Response Team (CCRT) fielded hundreds of questions and comments from community members before, during, and after the flood. The CCRT is a group of City staff who mobilize during a crisis to ensure City communications function successfully and people have access to the information they need to be safe. The CCRT members functioned as Public Information Officers (PIOs) to both residents and staff during the immediate flood crisis and recovery period.

What We’ve Learned

The City has implemented several new communications efforts as a direct result of the community input we’ve received throughout the past two months. Here are some of the ways we’re working to improve our communications based on our community’s feedback:

VT-Alert Messages

The City uses the Vermont Alert system (VT-Alert) to notify residents of emergency situations. This is the single best source of emergency communication from both the City and State. People can choose to receive calls, texts, e-mails, or combinations of the three. People can sign up for and receive VT-Alert calls **even if they don’t have a cell phone or other electronic device.**

This resource was mentioned frequently in our follow-up survey as a successful communication method. We sent out messages through VT-Alert frequently both before and during the flood. However, many residents didn’t know the messages originated from the City. Moving forward,



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all VT-Alert messages from the City will specifically state “- From the City of Montpelier” in the text and audio message. Sign up for VT-Alerts here: <https://vem.vermont.gov/vtalert>

Direct Communication Via Email

One of the most frequent requests we received was for direct communication between the City and residents. You can sign up to receive general informational updates from the City on our website using the “Notify Me” feature. You can sign up for newsletters from the Recreation Department, the Public Works, and City Manager’s weekly report. Sign up here:

<https://www.montpelier-vt.org/list.aspx>

Additionally, our new online Community Project Portal allows you to follow specific projects, provide feedback, and receive updates about them.

Flood Feedback Survey

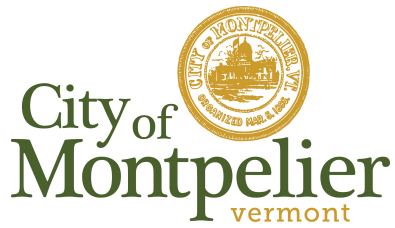
The City launched a Flood Feedback survey and asked respondents to share what existing communications worked well for them and to suggest opportunities for improvement. The survey was a low-barrier way for people to share their experiences and provide constructive feedback to City leadership. We did not impose any barriers to entry and did not require respondents to sign up to participate. 118 people responded.

Eleven channels of communication emerged from the responses. Of these, Facebook (24%) and Front Porch Forum (23%) were reported most frequently as a method of communication that worked well during the flood. Montpelier Alive (18%), VT-Alert (15%), and text/email notifications (7%) filled out the top five.

The suggested opportunities for improvement fell into eight broad categories: improve the visibility of City leadership, create more proactive communication, feature City communication more prominently, create a direct line of communication between the City and residents, clarify a single hub for City communications, improve the coordination between the City and the State, provide more non-digital methods of communication, and use more plain language.

Recovery & Resilience Forums

Montpelier resident Paul Costello, in partnership with the City, Montpelier Alive, and the Montpelier Foundation, helped organize and facilitate three public forums on the future of Montpelier after the July flood. Over 1,000 people participated in total from all three meetings.



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Each forum sought input from the public on how Montpelier can proactively adapt to and mitigate damage from future flood events. Participants submitted ideas through email, Zoom chat, Padlet, and in person at each meeting.

Feedback from the forums echoed the needs heard throughout the community. At the second forum held on August 22nd at the Vermont State House, participants ranked priorities for action within nine categories. Of the extensive list of ideas, the communications-related items within the City's capacity include:

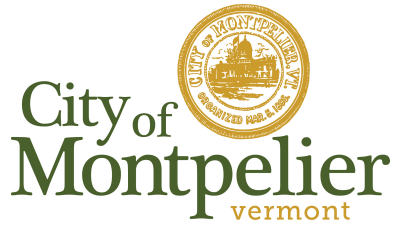
- Make emergency and disaster-preparedness info more accessible to vulnerable populations, non-English speakers, etc.
- Utilize more methods of notification systems
- Make City plans more broadly known and available
- Encourage and educate the community on how to sign up for VT-Alert
- Coordinate a communications hub within the City
- Improve communication channels to reach all Montpelier residents and businesses
- Include more geotargeted info in alerts with more specific info about what action people need to take
- Make more "how-to" style communications for City services and information

Disaster Preparedness

Preventative actions we can take today are the best way to prepare for the next natural disaster. There are many things we can do to improve our ability to be resilient, both at a City level and at an individual level. In the coming weeks, we'll be creating a page on the City's website dedicated to emergency management documents and resources. We will also make our Continuity Of Operations Plan (COOP) and our Emergency Management Plan more transparent and accessible to the public. These items will also be linked on the disaster preparedness webpage.

Create More How-To Info

We received several suggestions from residents looking for more information explaining where to go for info on City services and other resources. We also heard the desire for info to be consolidated into one place. To meet this need, the City is creating a "Welcome to Montpelier" booklet of information on vital City services. The booklet will contain how-to info for common activities such as paying taxes, how to contact City departments, and where to find zoning regulations. It'll also showcase all the ways to stay connected with the City. The booklet will be available as a live PDF to view and download on our website. Print copies can be provided on request from the City Manager's Office.



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City Communications Summary:

1. VT-Alert for Emergency Notifications
2. City Website for most city information as well as the Project Portal
3. Notify Me (from the website) for direct emails about specified content
4. City Manager's Weekly Report, DPW Newsletter, & Community Services Newsletter - all available for e-mail subscription using the Notify Me function.
5. Front Porch Forum and Facebook for key notices
6. Monthly *Montpelier Bridge* Page for updates on selected topics

Keep your eyes peeled for a new monthly information feature in the *Times-Argus*

Thank you for reading this article and for your interest in Montpelier City Government. Please contact me at 802-223-9502 or wfraser@montpelier-vt.org with questions or comments.