

**Town of Plainfield Select Board
Special Flood Recovery Informational Meeting
September 24, 2024
18 High St., Plainfield, VT and Via Zoom
Minutes - Approved**

Agenda:

- Call Meeting to Order
- Changes to Agenda
- Announcements
- Welcome and Opening Comments (Karl Bissex)
- Grants Activity Update (Karen Hatcher)
- FEMA Individual Assistance Update (Liz Bicknell)
- FEMA Public Assistance Update (Gary Smith)
- Great Brook Watershed Hazard Mitigation Grant Update (Michael Zahner)
- FEMA Buyout Program and Village Extension Project Update (Arion Thiboumery)
- Greatwoods Project Update (Lucinda Garthwaite)
- Q&A
- Adjourn

Present: Select Board members Karl Bissex (Chair), Patti Jamele, and Frances Rose Subbiondo. Also present were Town Grants Administrator Karen Hatcher, Town Assistant Grants Administrator Michael Zahner, Emergency Management Director and Hazard Mitigation Committee member Michael Billingsley, Town FEMA Buyout Program Coordinator Arion Thiboumery, Lucinda Garthwaite of the Greatwoods Project, Anne Van Couvering of Plainfield Area Community Trust, Paula Emery, Town Clerk/Treasurer Bram Towbin, Peter Youngbaer, Charlie Cogbill, Nancy Ellen, Dan Hardy, Dawn Fancher, Road Commissioner Josh Pitts, Walker Blackwell, Debra Stoleroff, Christie Farnham, and Dennis Fowler.

Call Meeting to Order:

This item was not discussed.

Changes to Agenda:

This item was not discussed.

Announcements:

This item was not discussed.

Welcome and Opening Comments (Karl Bissex):

Select Board Chair Karl Bissex welcomed attendees, encouraging them to get involved in flood recovery efforts, and thanked those that have already been contributing. He introduced Town Grants Administrator Karen Hatcher.

Grants Activity Update (Karen Hatcher):

Hatcher offered an overview of the activities of the Plainfield Grants Workgroup. She encouraged attendees to consider volunteering for this group. She shared that this group is currently comprised of herself as team lead, Michael Zahner who focuses on Hazard Mitigation, Gary Smith who is the Plainfield FEMA Public Assistance Coordinator, Liz Bicknell who is the Plainfield FEMA Individual Assistance Coordinator, Arion Thiboumery who is the Plainfield FEMA Buyout Program Coordinator and working on the Village Extension Project, Josh Pitts who is the Plainfield Road Commissioner and a Plainfield Water/Wastewater Commissioner, Karl Bissex who represents the Select Board on the team, Plainfield Emergency Management Director and Hazard Mitigation Committee member Michael Billingsley, and Town Clerk/Treasurer Bram Towbin. She explained that the goal of the workgroup is to identify, explore, and secure funding for flood recovery. She shared that FEMA offers three types of assistance: Public, Individual, and Hazard Mitigation. She stated that there are also other Federal funding sources that will be explored including HUD, Economic Development, and the EPA. She shared that a number of non-profit organizations are working with the Town to offer technical support and other resources. She explained that the workgroup has submitted a pre-application for FEMA Hazard Mitigation assistance for the Great Brook watershed which will be discussed later in this meeting by Michael Zahner. She further explained that the workgroup has started to request Public Assistance from FEMA for which Smith and Pitts have been actively documenting the damage inventory. She shared that the workgroup has put out an RFP to hire a Disaster Recovery Consultant for which submissions are due October 4, 2024. Additionally she explained that \$30,000 has been secured from the Vermont Community Foundation to pay for that position. She explained that the workgroup plans to offer regular updates to the community regarding recovery efforts.

Hatcher introduced Plainfield FEMA Individual Assistance Coordinator Liz Bicknell.

FEMA Individual Assistance Update (Liz Bicknell):

Bicknell shared that following President Biden's announcement on August 21, 2024 that Plainfield is in a federal disaster area FEMA personnel conducted interviews and made assessments of flood damage. She explained that the federal disaster declaration meant that those affected by the flooding in Plainfield could apply for FEMA assistance noting that, although the

FEMA disaster recovery center at Goddard has closed, there is still assistance available at the Barre Auditorium for the next two weeks. She explained that at the Barre Auditorium there are also representatives from the State who can help with applications for food and housing assistance, representatives from the Small Business Administration which offers loans to homeowners with flood damage, and USDA employees with information about agricultural assistance. She encouraged flood affected residents to go in-person to the disaster recovery center. She stated that she is working as Plainfield's Individual Assistance Coordinator. She explained that Individual Assistance (IA) funding consists of five categories: temporary housing, repairs to owner occupied homes, shelter in the form of trailers, hazard mitigation for homes, and damage to or loss of personal property. She shared that the first step for those affected by the flood is to make an insurance claim before applying to FEMA for assistance in covering what insurance doesn't, up to \$42,500. She stated that IA funds are not considered taxable income. She stated that those participating in the FEMA Buyout Program are still eligible for IA and any IA funds used to repair a flood damaged home will not be deducted from the buyout amount as long as the expenses are documented. She shared that H.O.P.E. Coalition in Washington County is a faith based organization from Barre headed by Dan Molind which will be offering assistance with heating and hot water systems and rebuilding. She shared that Efficiency Vermont will be announcing a program on October 1, 2024 to assist with purchase of furnaces. She shared that Plainfield Area Community Trust (PACT) is accepting applications at Plainfieldareacommunitytrust.org for the distribution of local monetary donations. She shared that a recent Vermont Digger article stated that 62 households in Plainfield have already applied for IA and have received \$312,000.

Bicknell explained that she and Grace Worcester are available to assist Plainfielders in applying for assistance, offering rides to the Barre Auditorium if needed, and answering IA related questions. She passed around a sign-up sheet for attendees.

FEMA Public Assistance Update (Gary Smith):

Plainfield FEMA Public Assistance Coordinator Gary Smith was unable to attend; Hatcher spoke on his behalf. She shared that FEMA Public Assistance (PA) provides funding for municipal damage repair, explaining that this would apply to the Town's damaged roads, bridges, and culverts. She explained that Smith and Road Commissioner Josh Pitts have been coordinating with Road Foreman Michael Bingham to inventory and document the details of all the repairs made to this infrastructure. They will also work to track and report the time donated by volunteers in the recovery effort. She explained that Smith had initiated Plainfield's request for PA before the deadline and the next step will be the assignment of a FEMA representative to come and evaluate the damage. She further explained that that person will call a scoping meeting with Town officials after which the Town will have 60 days to submit the damage repair details. She reiterated that the Town is looking to hire a Disaster Recovery Consultant who will help the

Town navigate completing the complex FEMA PA application, explaining that the cost of hiring the consultant can also be submitted to FEMA for reimbursement.

Hatcher introduced Town Assistant Grants Administrator Michael Zahner.

Great Brook Watershed Hazard Mitigation Grant Update (Michael Zahner):

Michael Zahner provided a brief history of his prior professional experience before commencing a slideshow entitled Town of Plainfield Flood Recovery 2024 – FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. He shared that he and Hatcher had met with Central Vermont Recovery Officer Pat Moulton on August 22, 2024 who had informed them of the FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. He shared that the Town had submitted the pre-application on August 30th. He explained that the purpose of the grant program is to resolve and mitigate impacts associated with a long history of continuous flooding in the Great Brook watershed with a focus on becoming a more resilient community pursuing “nature-based solutions”. He showed a photo of flood damage at the Brook Rd. Bridge near Creamery St. He explained that consultants had presented a number of alternatives for this bridge one of which was to remove the bridge to allow for a more natural alignment of the Great Brook as it enters the village. He shared that hydraulic modeling had shown this would increase the brook’s flood capacity and would achieve a more uniform flow but would only be possible with the buyout of many homes in the village. He said components of this plan would include replacement of the Mill St. Bridge with a larger structure designed to accept larger flows and floodplain restoration beginning just above the Brook Rd. Bridge and continuing to the Great Brook’s confluence with the Winooski River. He explained that no decisions have been made by the Town regarding this alternative. He provided slides showing an aerial view of homes applying for FEMA buyout, a photo of the flood damage to the former Mill St. Bridge, and the temporary Mill St. Bridge with rip rap. He highlighted that the temporary Mill St. Bridge, although sitting at level with the existing road, is restricting the brook’s flow which is being addressed by the Agency of Transportation. He shared that four feet of silt was deposited by flood waters under the bridge and through the village. Bissex explained that the temporary bridge will be raised and rip rap moved at the Agency of Transportation’s expense before the winter. Zahner described the Town of Northfield’s past experience with the creation of Dog River Park following the 2011 flooding after Tropical Storm Irene. He explained that the FEMA Hazard Mitigation grant would allow the Town to develop a quantitative watershed model for the Great Brook’s drainage basin and its tributaries which could involve development of a Stream Channel and Floodplain Management Plan starting in the upper watershed near Gore Rd. and continuing to its confluence with the Winooski River. He provided estimated project costs for removal and replacement of the Brook Rd. Bridge in the village with the overall cost projected to be between \$10 and \$15 million. He showed a drone photo of the Great Brook in the village and area surrounding the former location of the Mill St. Bridge. Emergency Management Director Michael Billingsley pointed out the side rail of the former Mill St. Bridge was visible in the photo as a vertical line down the middle of the brook’s channel,

sharing that during the flood the Mill St. Bridge had been picked up and moved 60 feet downstream and rotated 90 degrees.

FEMA Buyout Program and Village Extension Project Update (Arion Thiboumery):

Arion Thiboumery, owner of the apartment building known as the Heartbreak Hotel, Town FEMA Buyout Program Coordinator, and member of the Village Extension Project committee, shared that there are currently twenty-seven properties in Town that have put in for participation in the FEMA Buyout Program with about half of those being in the village and the other half along Brook Rd. He said he expects that there may be a few more applications. He stated that this could mean a loss of about 5%-10% of the taxable property in Town and noted that many of the damaged properties have already had their taxes abated. He explained that the Village Expansion Project aims to explore expanding the village to an area between the Main St. extension and East Hill Rd. where there is a large tract of open flat land which sits about fifty feet above the lower village. He shared that the project would entail the Town acquiring this land, currently owned by Bram Towbin and Erica Da Costa, and then subdividing a portion of the property into approximately thirty buildable lots on Town water and sewer and on Town roads. He explained that a goal is for the project to be realized at no cost to the Town which could be accomplished through sale of the subdivided lots and potentially through grant funding. He provided an aerial photo of the proposed property and described highlights and constraints of the landscape related to the proposed expansion project. He requested attendees complete a survey to help guide the fourteen person Village Expansion Project steering committee in their work. He shared that the steering committee is currently comprised of the following list of members: Dan Fingas, Eli Barlow, Erica Da Costa, Jake McBride, Jared Birchmore, Kim Madalinski, Lauren Geiger, Mary Trerice, Michael Billingsley, Paula Emery, Peter Young, Rick Burroughs, Sandy Ross, and Will Colgan. He encouraged attendees to consider joining this committee. He laid out the timeline for the goals of the committee from collecting public input through to the projected start of building in 2026. He shared that the committee has had exploratory conversations with groups like Downstreet Housing that may have an interest in building affordable housing at the expanded village site.

Greatwoods Project Update (Lucinda Garthwaite):

Bissex introduced Lucinda Garthwaite, explaining that the Goddard College campus is being sold. Garthwaite stated she is the only resident of Plainfield included in the Greatwood Group which is a group of five local people trying to buy the campus. She explained that the group is interested in housing and economic development of the property, creation of a conference center, and creating opportunities for arts and culture and historic preservation. She stated there are no plans at this time, only intention. She stated that the hope of the group is that the property will generate property taxes for the Town. She explained that the group needs to fund their purchase by the coming Monday and is still working to raise the needed funds.

Q&A:

Bissex opened the floor to public comment.

Bissex recognized Anne Van Couvering, a Plainfield resident who is a founding member of Plainfield Area Community Trust (PACT). She explained that PACT is a non-profit to “help Plainfield do things for Plainfield” and would like to participate in flood recovery by helping to host grant funded town meetings. Hatcher thanked Van Couvering and shared that a master recovery plan could include collaboration with PACT. Van Couvering stated her opinion that going forward flood resiliency should focus also on the Winooski River. Billingsley responded, stating that the Hazard Mitigation Committee, in collaboration with Friends of the Winooski, has found a grant to fund a river engineering firm which began the previous week surveying the area to investigate potential impacts on the village of high water of the Winooski River. He explained that part of the study will look at the impact of the Batchelder Dam.

Bissex recognized Paula Emery who noted that Brook Rd. is a federal highway and asked if that designation means the Federal and State government has a say in rebuilding the road and bridges and if they also hold responsibility for ongoing maintenance and upgrades. Bissex recognized Town Clerk/Treasurer Bram Towbin who stated the responsibility lies with the Town which receives some funding from the State for this purpose. He shared that a meeting is scheduled on October 1, 2024 for the Town to meet with representatives from the Federal Highway Administration. Bissex recognized Peter Youngbaer who suggested the Towns of Plainfield and Orange could request legislation be introduced to make Brook Rd. part of the state highway system which would mean that maintenance would be the responsibility of the State. Towbin responded stating that this idea had been explored in the past but not pursued as Brook Rd. would require expensive widening to qualify. Youngbaer asked if the federal highway designation meant the Town needed to maintain the road to a certain standard. Towbin explained that the Town applies for grants annually to help with road maintenance. Bissex recognized Billingsley who pointed out that any effort to widen Brook Rd. will take away from the flow area of the Great Brook.

Bissex recognized Charlie Cogbill who pointed out that many properties downstream from the confluence of the Great Brook and the Winooski River were also damaged and are threatened by future flooding events. He asked if these places are being considered in the Hazard Mitigation Committee/Friends of the Winooski scoping study. He shared information about the USDA Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) grant and asked for a review of the work of the Plainfield Grants Workgroup. Hatcher stated that earlier the same day the workgroup had finalized a draft letter indicating the Town would like to sponsor the EWP grant as they are aware that approximately seven properties are interested. She stated that once approved by the Select Board the letter will be sent before the end of September. She thanked Cogbill for

bringing this grant to the workgroup's attention and encouraged attendees to also share information about funding opportunities.

Bissex recognized Nancy Ellen who asked about the possibility of replacing the Mill St. Bridge with an arched bridge. Towbin explained that the temporary bridge in place on Mill St. currently cost approximately \$173,000 to install including the rip rap which should be covered by the State.

Dan Hardy asked if there was consideration for a hydraulic wing bridge at the Mill St. location. Bissex acknowledged that the temporary bridge restricts the water flow. Hardy asked for an explanation of the rationale for replacing Bridge 21 (the first Brook Rd. Bridge in the village) given that many homes in that vicinity are requesting FEMA buyout. Bissex acknowledged that not replacing the bridge is being considered but the engineering process has not yet begun to answer this question.

Bissex recognized Youngbaer who pointed out the challenges posed by having only one egress in and out of the village over the aging Main St. Bridge. He encouraged the exploration of creating a second way in and out of the village in the long term planning. Hatcher stated that this subject is included in the planning conversation and will be further discussed in a series of community meetings led by the Vermont Council of Rural Development. Towbin stated that this topic has been discussed with the State and he pointed out challenges with finding another point of egress within the Town.

Bissex recognized Dawn Fancher who asked about planning and management of the Great Brook further upstream than the Brook Rd. Bridge in the village and if there is currently a committee discussing this. Road Commissioner Josh Pitts stated that the Town is still exploring issues related to planning for the future of Brook Rd. which includes identifying funding sources. He shared his hope that the next community informational meeting will include more information about Brook Rd. Bissex stated that the process of recovery will be several years and he encouraged attendees to join committees to help with flood recovery. He acknowledged there is not a committee currently organized to address the future of Brook Rd. Hardy asked if the work which is currently being done on the Great Brook is by State contractors and inquired about the cost to date for flood damage repairs already completed. Towbin stated the work in the Great Brook is being done by State contractors but that most other contractors are hired by the Town. He estimated that the Town has already paid out \$200,000 with \$400,000 in invoices still unpaid. He noted that FEMA will reimburse some of those funds. He shared that the Town is working on borrowing funds from the Bond Bank. Bissex stated that borrowing money at a low interest rate will help bridge the time it takes until the Town is reimbursed by FEMA.

Bissex asked attendees to share ideas for topics to be covered at the next community informational meeting. Youngbaer asked for updates on plans for temporary turnarounds for emergency vehicles and other larger vehicles on the isolated parts of Brook Rd. as winter approaches. Pitts stated that he and Road Foreman Michael Bingham have been considering options for this at various points on Brook Rd. An attendee asked about emergency vehicle access. Pitts encouraged this person to reach out to emergency services for their input.

Bissex recognized Cogbill who requested future informational meetings include details of the recovery projects that have already been completed.

Pitts read a question from the Zoom chat from Walker Blackwell who asked for information about the State's plans for deepening the Great Brook in the village.

Pitts read a question from the Zoom chat from Debra Stoleroff who asked for a Town informational meeting to discuss the creation of a lower or upper village both on Towbin's land and the Goddard campus.

Pitts read a comment from the Zoom chat that asked about exploring the option of putting in a second bridge to the village from Rte. 2 at the location of a yellow house. He explained that that particular location is not suitable due to a water/sewer crossing in the vicinity.

An attendee thanked the meeting organizers for holding this informational meeting.

Bissex recognized Garthwaite who stated that the Greatwoods Project, if successful in acquiring the Goddard campus, would be interested in participating in the Town's planning process.

Pitts read a comment from the Zoom chat from Christie Farnham and Dennis Fowler who asked if the Town could communicate a list of abandoned or vacant homes. Bissex stated that the Town cannot dictate what private owners choose to do with their properties.

Bissex recognized Emery who requested an aerial visual of all of the homes requesting FEMA buyout be included at a future community informational meeting. They also asked for an update on the recent Rte. 2 work to secure the roadside slope near Goddard campus.

Adjourn:

Bissex suggested the meeting be adjourned at 7:56 PM.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Kristin Brosky, Assistant Town Clerk.