

# Town of Plainfield Selectboard Special Meeting

## Flood Recovery Community Update

Monday, May 5, 2025, 6:00 PM

Plainfield Town Hall Opera House, 18 High St, and Zoom

Attendees:

- Karen Hatcher, Town Grants Administrator
- Gary Smith, Lister and FEMA Public Assistance Coordinator
- Josh Pitts, Town Treasurer and Road Commissioner
- Keith Cubbon, planner at the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission
- Dawn Fancher, Accessibility Committee member
- Lauren Geiger, East Village Expansion Advisory Committee Co-chair
- Arion Thiboumery, Buyout Coordinator and Village Expansion Lead
- Michael Billingsley, Emergency Management Director
- George Springston, Geologist and Research Assistant Professor at Norwich University

**Karen Hatcher names the town's transition from the emergency repair phase to the recovery and permanent projects phase** to set the stage for the meeting.

**Gary Smith shows a Google Earth map of Plainfield marked with sites of damage from the 2024 flood.** He then presents another map showing the remaining permanent flood recovery projects, which are concentrated along Brook Rd. Karen introduces Keith Cubbon from the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission.

**Keith Cubbon explains that his team created the map of permanent flood recovery projects, showing all the permanent repair projects,** including three types of FEMA projects: C - Roads and Bridges; D - water control such as Batchelder Dam; and F - Utilities. Keith notes that Brook Rd is a federal highway network road. That type of project goes through the Department of Transportation and Federal Highway, and is notated on the map with the pentagon symbols.

**Gary Smith reports on the FEMA Public Assistance Project Progress, and refers to major disaster declaration DR 4810.** He recognizes key players, who he calls "Team Plainfield" - Town office staff, other town employees, town Grants work group mostly made up of volunteers, the Integrity Group consulting team, governor's staff/team, Vermont Emergency Management, Funders Roundtable, Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission, VT League of Cities and Towns, and others.

**Gary Smith presents the FEMA Public Assistance National Workflow**, and notes that the Plainfield is in the ending steps of Phase 2: Impacts & Eligibility, and Gary anticipates the town will complete Phase 3: Scoping & Costing within the next few months. After that, work on permanent projects can begin. Gary explains the distinction between Emergency work (debris removal and emergency protective measures that happen during the six-month period following the disaster event) and Permanent work (repair and reconstruction of roads and bridge systems, water and wastewater control facilities, public buildings and equipment, public utilities, and parks and recreation).

**Gary Smith presents a high-level timeframe of FEMA public assistance, and notes that the entire process for a complex disaster (such as Plainfield's 2024 flood) can take four to five years.** He provides a breakdown of funding sources for this work [see presentation for details]. Challenges in the process include complexity of the damage, the multiple funding sources and complex requirements, and staff changes at FEMA. Gary emphasizes the progress made so far. He contrasts the map of all damaged sites, many of which were addressed as emergency projects, with the live map of remaining permanent projects. He commends the road crew for their work in this process.

**Gary outlines next steps in the FEMA Public Assistance process:** getting funding reimbursement for emergency repair work, completing Scoping & Costing, planning and implementing permanent repairs, and coordinating repairs with other recovery work.

**Josh Pitts discusses the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Emergency Relief Program**, which provides funding to repair and restore highway facilities to pre-disaster conditions. He notes that Brook Road is a federal highway connector and therefore different from other roads in Plainfield. Permanent projects through the FHWA are 90% federally funded. The Brook Road route is divided into twelve smaller projects or locations. Within those twelve locations, some areas only required emergency repair and did not require a permanent solution, while others still require further engineering work and study before a permanent solution is found.

**The town is currently working with the Municipal Assistance Section at Vermont Agency of Transportation (AOT)** to access municipal project management and an established at-the-ready process for simplified project initiation and design. Josh notes that we are in the Project Initiation stage for at least three locations along Brook Road. He discusses Project Alternative Investigation and Preferred Alternative Endorsement.

**Josh announces there will be public information meetings, each one focusing on a particular area of permanent work.** These meetings will allow for focused feedback without

getting overwhelmed by the entire process of re-establishing Brook Road. Josh talks about some differences in the processes with FEMA and with the FHWA.

**Q&A begins. Lauren Geiger asks when the debris on Hudson Avenue will be removed.** Gary Smith responds, stating that it will depend on whether it's on public or private land, and that he needs more information before he can provide a specific answer.

**Frances Rose reads a question from Dawn Fancher, "When will the community get the chance to have input on, or at least hear about, the plan and strategy for Brook Rd and the Brook as a whole?"** Josh Pitts responds that each project will be implemented as its own unit, and that the coordination of that will be informed by reviews by Central Vermont Regional Planning, which Keith Cubbon details.

**Arion Thiboumery asks how cost will be evaluated.** Keith responds that Federal Highway has the final say. Sometimes they will choose a project that's more expensive than an alternative, though generally it works the other way.

**Frances Rose asks if there is a cohesive big picture that all of the smaller projects fit into.** Josh responds that it's a local project, with public input and information sessions. Design firms, project management firms will be the throughlines across the projects. Josh emphasizes that the public information meetings will be opportunities to identify and name community concerns and desires, which then get plugged into the Purpose and Need statements within each project. Josh voices that as Road Commissioner, he wants to maintain the connections that the road provides, as they are valuable for the social environment, our economy, and our community in general. He reiterates that the community will have continued forums for input in the form of the informational meetings throughout the process.

**Frances Rose reads a question from Toby:** "Debris continues to build up along the Great Brook. Anyone who walks along the brook can see landslides, debris sloughing off into the brook. Is the town looking to do any protective measures to mitigate further damage of problems caused by high water events in the future? Or are we just focused on reacting to what's already happened."

**Michael Billingsley responds.** He points out that debris plays a positive role, providing a water break and helping the water to decelerate. Some sites are still settling from the disturbance of the flooding. Part of the healthy solution for the future is to have the brook settle into an arrangement where the energy of the river or brook can be absorbed into the landscape. The debris doesn't create flooding, and it can help slow the water. The Town of Plainfield is working with river scientists and the builder contractors to create a cost-benefit analysis. To plan for a better, safer, more predictable future, looking to the past can provide helpful information.

**Karen Hatcher adds that one of the grants is a multi-town grant to study the Great Brook from top to bottom**, through the Vermont Emergency Management group, who is doing the work. The study will help us understand how the brook responds to potential solutions.

**Karl Bissex asks about the difference in cost to the town of the 2023 flood and the 2024 flood.** Josh Pitts responds. Currently \$1.7 million dollars spent for flood recovery works from the town. He continues to talk about reimbursements from 2023 that's funding some of the 2024 recovery work. In terms of magnitude, 2023 was \$300,000. Karen Hatcher lists more reimbursement moneys expected from FEMA and Federal Highway. The costs are being calculated on the FEMA side and so the grants group doesn't have those numbers yet. Rough estimate might be \$10 million for FEMA alone.

**Michael Billingsley announces a special meeting related to the damage to Batchelder Dam** next Thursday.

**Selectboard member Peter Youngbaer asks a question about buyouts** and when in the budget cycle the selectboard will be making decisions about what will happen with greenspace. Example: if village buildings are moved and the brook is allowed to go where it wants to go, we may be able to get more park space and need a bigger parks and rec committee to handle that.

**Karl Bissex responds that the National Park Service offers free consulting**, directing us to funding sources, advising about plantings to stabilize the banks, and what the town can do and build with the green space.

**Michael Billingsley speaks about the teams dealing with houses damaged by the floods** and the timeline associated with that work.

**George responds to a question about when discussions should take place about how Brook Rd should be repaired.** George speaks about where we can guide the brook in some fashion, where we can get out of the way of the brook, and where we can help the stream through river engineering work to find more stable states.

**Karl thanks the Grants group and Karen in particular, and asks for a motion to adjourn the meeting.** Peter Youngbaer makes the motion, Frances Rose seconds, and the motion to adjourn passes unanimously.