

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
PUBLIC SAFETY OVERSIGHT & PLANNING
SUBCOMMITTEE MEETING
Minutes of August 28, 2023**

- I. ROLL CALL.** Select Board members Lydia Petty and Merry Shernock. Others present included Town Manager Jeff Schulz, Fire Chief Peter J. DeMasi, Ambulance Director Meggan McCusker, Utility Superintendent James Russo, and Matthew Romei (Northfield Ambulance).

The meeting started at 3:09 PM.

- II. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SCHEDULED):** None

- III. APPROVAL OF MINUTES.** Motion by Board member Petty, seconded by Board member Shernock, to approve the meeting minutes of August 16, 2023. **The minutes were approved unanimously.**

IV. DISCUSSION

- a. July 2023 Flooding Rainstorm: After-Action Discussion.** Northfield Fire Department (NFD) Chief DeMasi said he felt that the local emergency services responded well to the local flooding event. He noted that some low lying areas did have to be put under voluntary evacuation and the NFD, the Northfield Police Department (NPD), and Northfield Ambulance Service (NAS) assisted with this. Manager Schulz said there have been some questions about whether the Fire Station was the best location for the emergency command center. He asked if there had been any actual problems with this. Chief DeMasi said it seemed to work well. He added that during the emergency response with Tropical Storm Irene in August 2011, there was a shared location with the Fire Station and the adjacent Police Station. However, as this recent event occurred when the NPD Chief position was vacant, it was thought best to have just one location at the Fire Station. Chief DeMasi said the building does have upstairs meeting space and Wi-Fi access. Since this is a volunteer department and the building is empty most of the time, there aren't a lot of "creature comforts" present but it does function well as an emergency center. Manager Schulz asked if the Wi-Fi download speed, etc. was sufficient. NAS Chief McCusker said it was sufficient once they were able to log on. There had been a brief delay before NAS members received the password but that shouldn't be a problem in the future. Chief McCusker added that the NAS personnel brought their own laptop computers to the Fire Station. She said she brought hers as well even though it usually stays in her office at the Ambulance Bay. Manager Schulz asked if the Fire Station's internet bandwidth needed to be increased. Chief McCusker said this wasn't necessary as it worked well. Manager Schulz asked if there had been any specific problems using the Fire Station as the emergency center. Chief DeMasi said the Police Station does have a dedicated room for training sessions, meetings, etc. and additional working space so it would be more comfortable for a long-term stay than the Fire Station. As indicated before, the Fire Station is only used when there is a callout so there is no microwave, coffeemaker, etc. Board member Shernock felt the other Select Board members should be made aware that the Fire Station currently is not well provisioned for extended usage. Utility Superintendent Russo said last month's rainstorm was nothing like what happened with Irene when the downtown flooded, municipal facilities were inundated, etc. Manager Schulz said perhaps there should be a shift towards providing additional portable laptop computers for emergency responders, providing better kitchen facilities at the Fire Station and perhaps some bunkbeds for prolonged building use, etc.

Board member Petty feels the Fire Station appears to be good command center for short-term emergencies but the Police Station would be the better location for events of longer duration. She felt this should be clarified in the local emergency management plan. Chief McCusker noted there were some initial conversations regarding who was in ultimate charge of the situation. Manager Schulz currently serves as the interim Emergency Management Director (EMD) but since the Town Manager is already part of the emergency response chain of command (along with the Select Board Chair), perhaps it would be best to appoint a permanent EMD in the near future. Chief DeMasi is willing to serve if necessary but Chief McCusker believes her main focus should be maintaining adequate NAS staffing levels. Former NAS Chief Lawton Rutter had been EMD previously but had left the position when he took on a new job several months ago with the State of Vermont. Chief McCusker suggested that now that Mr. Rutter is well established with his new job responsibilities, perhaps he would be willing to return as Northfield's EMD. Manager Schulz will reach out to him to see if he has any interest. Chief McCusker noted Mr. Rutter still serves as NAS Assistant Chief.

Manager Schulz noted Highway Foreman Trent Tucker has his crew out making road repairs as soon as the storm abated. He asked is there had been any damage at the Northfield Wastewater Treatment Facility (WWTF). Utility Superintendent Russo said one small motor was put out of service but this was resolved relatively quickly. Board member Petty said another concern about the emergency response had been with communication with the public about emergency shelter locations, etc. There also were questions about whether pets would be allowed at these locations. This should be made clearer in future. Chief McCusker said one problem was that the shelter locations were not confirmed before voluntary evacuations were begun. Manager Schulz said we were fortunate that Norwich University (NU) did open its shelter so quickly. There had been delays opening the shelter at the school since this is summertime and it was harder to coordinate with school officials. Board member Petty said there should have been a better job of informing the public. Chief McCusker said emergency responders assisting with evacuations should have all the answers before they first interact with the public. She added that most of the issues involved with this emergency situation were related to communication challenges. Board member Petty felt the communication venues for informing the public during such events should be specified in the local emergency response plan. Chief McCusker said in many cases, those residents advised to evacuate would prefer to stay with friends and family rather than go to an emergency shelter. Chief DeMasi noted that during this emergency, the evacuations were voluntary and not mandatory. Utility Superintendent Russo said those residents that went through Irene do know the local worst case scenarios regarding flooding, etc. At that time, some residents had to be evacuated by boat due to flooded streets. Board member Petty asked what would happen if Mayo Healthcare had to be evacuated. Chief DeMasi said since this facility is located on relatively high ground, it probably would be best if the staff and residents were sheltered in place. Chief McCusker said there probably would not be enough local ambulance units available to transport all those with medical concerns. A full evacuation of the facility should be a last resort action only. Utility Superintendent Russo said another concern would be where the facility residents would be relocated as such a major flooding event probably would have regional impact. Chief DeMasi said he remained in contact with the Mayo Healthcare Director during the July events about any flooding concerns.

Utility Superintendent Russo left at this time.

Manager Schulz said it appears that there are some issues that need to be worked on before the next local natural disaster. He felt these could be discussed further at the next subcommittee meeting. Board member Shernock asked if there was a location where residents could obtain sandbags if needed to protect their homes from flooding. Chief McCusker said this is something the Highway Department could provide. They already provide a sand pile during the wintertime for residents looking to sand down their driveways. Chief DeMasi noted this sand pile is located near the Ambulance Bay. If there is a distribution of sandbags during a flooding event, it probably should be done at the Fire Station where there is much higher ground. Board member Petty felt that when there are weather forecasts indicating the possibility of a natural disaster affecting Northfield, there should be pre-event notifications about emergency shelter locations, etc. Chief DeMasi noted this storm happened on a Monday and there had been ominous weather forecasts over the weekend. Manager Schulz suggested the subcommittee meet next month about these suggestions and he will prepare a report on what has been learned. Board member Petty suggested this report could be appended to the local emergency management plan. She also noted that there was internet access during the rainstorm but there were subsequent multiday internet and cellphone outages afterwards. Board member Petty asked if the municipality is prepared should a natural disaster be accompanied by such outages. Manager Schulz said Trans-Video experienced a multiday internet outage when its service network was disrupted elsewhere. Trans-Video is now adding an internet feed from another direction for system redundancy and this should limit future prolonged outages. Chief McCusker said there is a possibility of setting up an emergency cellular network for local emergencies. She added that NAS does have communication radios but their usefulness in an emergency situation is limited.

Matt Romei arrived at this time. He had been watching the meeting remotely but had been unable to interact due to a faulty microphone (or some other reason).

Mr. Romei said that in case of a full or partial evacuation at Mayo Healthcare, there is a mutual aid agreement with similar facilities in the area to provide shelter and treatment for evacuees. These facilities also would assist with transportation under the agreement. As for communication problems during a natural disaster, Mr. Romei was in Montpelier during the worst of the recent storm when the streets flooded. He said a communications box was set up downtown that created Wi-Fi hot spots wherever needed. There also were emergency cell phones that don't require local hubs for service. Mr. Romei also serves on the Berlin Fire Department and said they are looking into Starlink, which is a satellite internet system. He said there is an initial cost for the setup but afterwards Starlink only bills for when the device is turned on. Therefore, it is possible to install Starlink as a backup internet provider should the local provider go down due to broken service lines, etc. As for improving communication with the public during a natural disaster, Mr. Romei said Vermont Emergency Management (VEM) has the VT-Alert system that provides subscribed users with emergency updates on their cell phones, landlines, computers, etc. with "evacuation information; chemical spills; shelter-in-place alerts; severe weather advisories; boil water advisories, and roadway interruptions." The website is <https://vem.vermont.gov/vtalert> and subscribers can sign up to receive alerts for up to five (5) different locations in case their children attend school in another community, etc. Manager Schulz said VT-Alert could be used as an additional venue for providing Northfield residents with emergency notifications. He then thanked Mr. Romei for the valuable information.

V. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (UNSCHEDULED). There was none.

VI. ADJOURNMENT. Motion by Board member Petty, seconded by Board member Shernock, to adjourn. There was no objection.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:13 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

These minutes were approved at the subcommittee meeting of October 4, 2023.