



Photo by Gordon Miller

Community Recovery Partnership Report

October 2012



THANK YOU

...to the over 500 individuals that participated in the Community Recovery Partnership (CRP) meetings and so eloquently and personally shared their stories, the lessons they learned and their needs for the future. To the town leaders and staff, first responders, teachers, volunteers, donors, residents, home owners, business people, students, farmers, and others who honestly and constructively shared their ideas to rebuild their communities stronger – thank you.

...to Governor Shumlin for making interagency cooperation, customer service and local interaction a bedrock of this administration and for launching the CRP initiative. Thanks to our Irene Recovery Officers, Neale Lunderville and Sue Minter for their participation and backing of efforts to travel to communities and respond directly to those impacted by Tropical Storm Irene.

...to our partners who participated in the CRP, attending meetings, responding to requests, pushing to get answers, initiating programs and providing technical assistance and funding – staff from Senators Leahy’s and Sanders’ and Congressman Welch’s offices; Vermont state representatives, the Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies, our intern Sam Lacy, the Vermont Disaster Relief Fund, the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, the Longterm Recovery Committees, Preservation Trust of Vermont, Vermont Youth Conservation Corps, Small Business Development Center, and the many other partner organizations. Thank you.

~ Noelle MacKay, Commissioner
Department of Economic, Housing, & Community Development
for the Irene Recovery Coordination Team

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Courtesy of Laura Parette with assistance from Sarah-Lee Terrat, photo by Gordon Miller.

Intent to Action

The Community Recovery Partnership (CRP) was designed to bring local, regional, state and federal partners together to better understand the issues facing survivors and begin to lay the building blocks of recovery in a tailored and coordinated fashion. The meetings provided a venue to hear directly from those impacted and involved with local recovery. The stories, ideas and criticism shared by over 500 participants helped to shape and mold the way state agencies and our partners approach recovery. Throughout the sidebars in this document you will learn how those involved have turned ideas and recommendations into action based on the needs identified during this initiative.

Overview

Self-reliant, strong, ingenious and generous – when faced with the aftermath of Tropical Storm Irene, Vermonters and Vermont communities proved that the characteristics that define our state and our people surged forth even before flood waters receded. From Bennington to Brattleboro, from Killington mountain to the valley of the Mad River, the lives of thousands changed in an instant.

When tested by this crisis, Vermonters did not sit on the sidelines. Recovery began the day of the disaster and has continued every day since. Inch-by-inch, we are making progress and Vermonters have showcased their resourceful, self-reliant, community spirit.

To better understand and assess the needs of communities following the storm, and to assure people of the state's support, Governor Shumlin launched the Community Recovery

Partnership. This report describes the outreach effort, as well as the outcomes and findings. It outlines what the intent of the initiative was and what will follow into action. This report focuses on the disaster experiences and future needs of communities and complements other state initiatives including those of the Irene Recovery Office (IRO) and Vermont Emergency Management's (VEM) After Action Review.

Lives are unique, and each individual's story is personal. The diagram from FEMA on the next page, illustrates the various stages of recovery and time frames. However, as we learned during the CRP meetings, there are no hard and fast rules. Each stage of response for an individual, business or community can depend on the level of preparedness, severity of the event, leadership availability and many, many other factors.

"I was struck by the stories we heard in every community demonstrating Vermonter's determination and ingenuity under pressure – communities found solutions despite limited resources...the all-hands-on-deck, face-to-face meetings on the green to coordinate and plan without the benefit of modern communication, ad hoc transportation networks to deliver supplies and medicine – foot, horse, bike, ATV – to Waterbury's overnight cafeterias to feed the entire community..."

It made me realize that perseverance and creativity is what helps communities – and individuals – carry on and overcome challenges. It inspires me to do my best and use those same skills in helping in recovery."

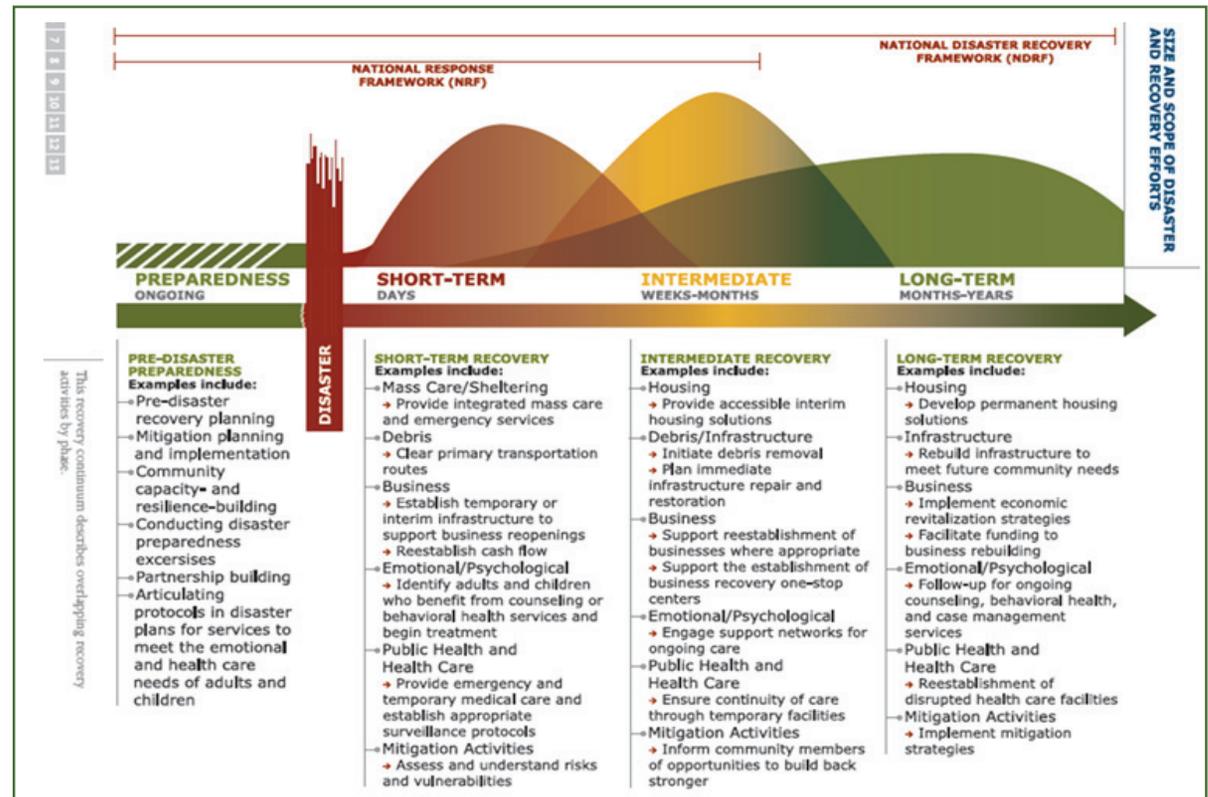
Chris Cochran,
Director of the Division of Community Planning and
Revitalization, Agency of Commerce and Community
Development

Governor Shumlin created the Community Recovery Partnership to:

- Identify the major needs of communities most impacted by Tropical Storm Irene
- Understand each community's current capacity
- Build and strengthen relationships with local leaders
- Create a baseline of information to track recovery progress
- Enhance coordination and communication among local groups as well as between local, regional and state agencies and organizations

Led by the Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD), an interagency team hosted local community meetings, provided individual follow up and recommended action steps as outlined in this report. The team documented community meetings, subsequent discussions and next steps. Clear recommendations were made to ensure that ongoing recovery efforts are coordinated and Vermont is better prepared for any future event. With our climate changing, we will be at risk of flooding or damage -- it's just a matter of when, not if.¹

The Community Recovery Partnership revealed core competencies and strengths, and also identified areas that need improvement. Consistently, and throughout the course of the meetings, the team heard that Vermont should not be satisfied with simply fixing the damage and returning to status quo. Rather, Vermonters have a desire and priority to be more informed,



The Recovery Continuum. FEMA

and better prepared, rebuilding in ways that reduce risk and cost.

Given current economic realities, Vermonters recognize that it is in our collective interest to prepare and build stronger, safer and smarter communities that minimize the risk of future disaster events. Vermonters who participated in the community meetings shared a strong desire to "do it right" when rebuilding.

Looking forward, the outcome of Tropical Storm Irene created an opportunity for Vermont to achieve the very best of what Vermonters

envision for our state and for generations to come. The recommendations in this report address our strengths, expose our vulnerabilities and highlight the needs identified by over 500 Vermonters in communities hardest hit by Irene. Implementing these recommendations to rebuild Vermont strong will involve a focused and longterm collective effort to ensure a safe and sound future.

¹ *Environment America: Research and Policy Center. In the Eye of the Storm: Global Warming, Extreme Weather, and the Impacts of Weather-Related Disasters in the United States. Feb. 2012*

Community Recovery Partnership Meetings

In the aftermath of Tropical Storm Irene, Vermonters quickly rallied together to address their community's and neighbor's needs. State agencies along with local and regional partners jumped into action – repairing roads, providing information on river function and debris, raising public health concerns and connecting local needs to FEMA assistance.

Quickly communities turned to longterm recovery work and applied the same collaborative spirit to rebuilding and envisioning their future. In towns and villages in the hardest hit regions across the state, community residents, new and old, came together to communicate their shared vision and individual experiences with the CRP Team. The initial community meetings were designed as a 'listening tour' and an opportunity for state officials to outreach to Vermonters, to identify short and long term needs and to create a framework to enable communities to emerge from disaster stronger and safer than before. CRP team also envisioned that the information gathered would inform initiatives for intra-agency support and integration, and facilitate collaboration in longterm planning and implementation of recovery efforts.

The Meetings:

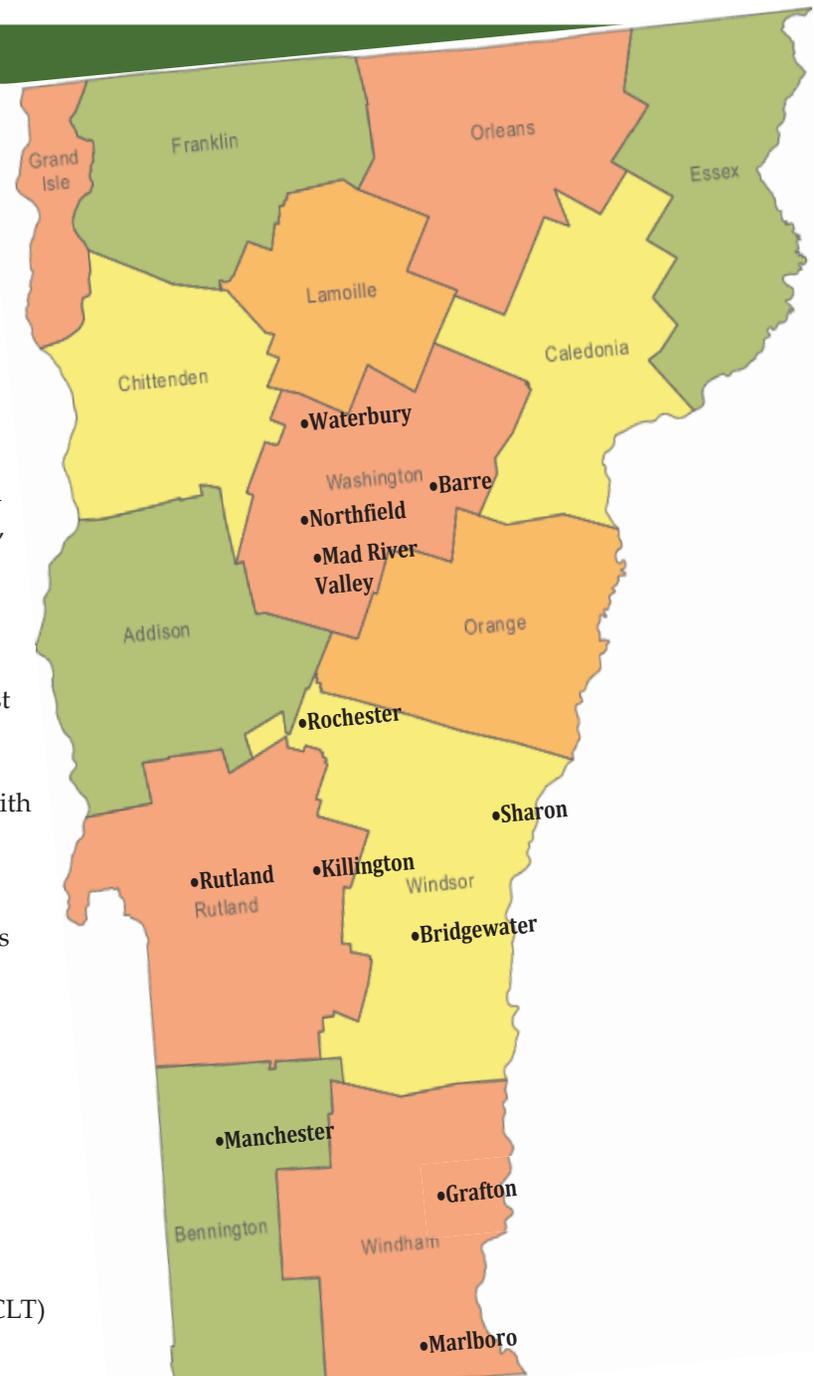
Between November 2011 and March 2012, 12 CRP meetings were held, covering the 45 hardest hit Vermont towns. Over 500 people attended the meetings, shared their stories, successes, challenges, recommendations, and asked questions. The team included leadership and staff from various state agencies as well as other local, regional and state organizations involved with various aspects of planning, response and recovery.

State agency recovery partners included:

- Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD)
- Agency of Human Services (AHS)
- Agency of Natural Resources (ANR)
- Agency of Transportation (AOT)
- Irene Recovery Office (IRO)
- Vermont Emergency Management (VEM)

Other partners included:

- Congressional staff from Senators Leahy's and Sanders', and Congressman Welch's Offices
- Vermont Legislators
- Regional Planning Commission staff representing the regions impacted
- Regional Development Corporation staff representing the regions impacted
- Vermont Disaster Relief Fund (VDRF)
- Local Longterm Recovery Committees
- Vermont League of Cities and Towns (VCLT)



- Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB)
- Regional affordable housing organizations
- Preservation Trust of Vermont (PTV)
- Starting Over Strong (SOS)
- Vermont Youth Conservation Corps (VYCC)
- Small Business Development Center (SBDC)

The Regional Planning Commissions were key partners in setting up and advertising the meetings. Meetings were held in public facilities – school gymnasiums, town halls, and meeting rooms. Email requests were sent to local public officials, school boards, and local and regional organizations (i.e. chambers of commerce, downtown organizations, housing organizations, etc.) inviting them to share their insights and perspective. Flyers were posted, press releases distributed, and the media invited.

Listening Sessions:

Each meeting was facilitated by Commissioner Noelle MacKay of the Department of Economic, Housing and Community Development (DEHCD) within the Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD). Rather than a presentation by state officials, each meeting was an opportunity to learn from those most impacted and involved in local community response and recovery efforts. Participants were asked to share what worked, what lessons were learned and to identify the challenges faced during the response and immediate recovery phases. Citizens were also asked to outline future needs, to express how they would envision their communities recovering in the coming months and years, and what would be necessary to make the vision a reality in addition

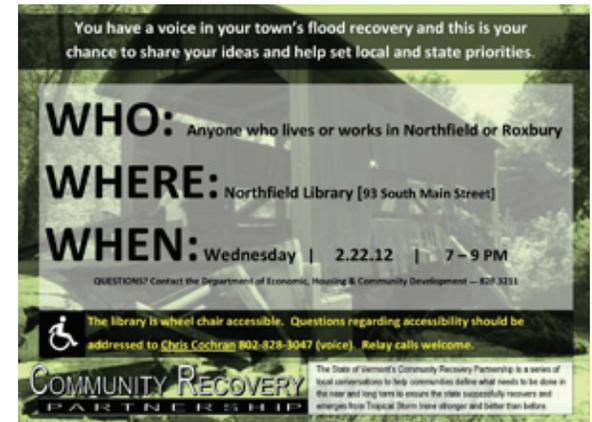
to what they might do differently as a result of Irene. Summaries and complete notes for each meeting can be viewed on the state’s recovery website – www.vtstrong.vermont.gov.

The mix of participants varied in each session and included municipal officials, business owners, farmers, first responders, non-profit organizations, survivors, volunteers, and teachers. In each session, experiences were shared, concerns raised, improvements suggested and questions posed to the visiting team.

Questions that could not be answered at the meeting were addressed by the appropriate state agency personnel following the meeting. As similar questions arose over the course of multiple meetings, informational sheets and case studies were created and posted on the recovery website (www.vtstrong.vermont.gov) as reference. For example, questions around debris (woody, gravel, property, etc.) were raised at most meetings. A fact sheet on woody debris was developed and posted on the recovery website. Then, based upon requests, representatives from the Agency of Natural Resources conducted follow up site visits to respond to specific debris scenarios and provide more detailed information (see page 5 “Debris Teams”).

Inquiries on how to flood-proof homes and businesses led to the development of case studies highlighting successful mitigation techniques. <http://vtstrong.vermont.gov/Home/CommunityCaseStudy.aspx>

In some instances, questions asked could not be answered immediately, nor were responses what people hoped to hear. For example, little



CRP meeting notice sent to local leaders and posted in towns.



DEHCD Commissioner Noelle MacKay and ANR Deputy Commissioner Justin Johnson at Barre Alumni Hall

financial support was available to help restore river banks with the exception of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and some property repairs provided by the Vermont Disaster Relief Fund. We also had to share that only loans are available to help businesses rebuild and recover apart from small grants from the Vermont Irene Flood Relief Fund and other localized funding efforts. Vermonters identified the ongoing challenges to clean up debris (gravel, woody, building, etc.) with little FEMA support available to cover costs.

Meeting Follow Up

As previously stated, when faced with unresolved questions or specific requests, the appropriate agency or partner organization was asked to respond post meeting. Examples of follow up included:

Barre Meeting:

Issue: Town staff identified an older, narrow bridge in good condition, yet its design constricts the brook which results in repetitive damages to the road approach and to downstream property.

Resolution: State dispatched the AOT Regional Manager to discuss design alternatives with town Selectboard. IRO continues to challenge FEMA's decision to fund repairs that result in repetitive losses, but not to fund improvements to make infrastructure more resilient.

Bridgewater Meeting:

Issue: Participants identified concerns about soil contamination and impacts to public health.

Resolution: ANR reported that soil samples tested to date were clean, with the exception of localized spills (primarily fuel tanks). The Department of Public Health was consulted and reported that they had not seen an increase in illness linked to Irene-related contaminants.

Killington Meeting:

Issue: One of the towns noted the need for heavy equipment to repair roads, however the expiration of the exemption period was imminent.

Issue: At the same meeting, participants asked the state to evaluate flood resilience of current design/construction standards for roads and bridges.

Resolution: Within 24 hours, the Department of Motor Vehicles' Commissioner Ide arranged an extension for the town.

Resolution: AOT is currently working on a transportation resiliency project designed to evaluate and recommend options for ensuring our transportation network remains functioning during disaster events.

Northfield Meeting:

Issue: Concerns were raised about propane tanks dislodged from homes and businesses and swept away by flood waters to other locations. This debris was a risk and hazard and citizens were concerned on how to address removal. Participants also suggested that it is important to require tanks to be tied-down so that this risk was reduced in the future.

Resolution: ANR noted that the fuel distributors owned the tanks. The agency connected those with tank debris on their property with Vermont Fuel Buyers Association to coordinate tank recovery. There was a bill introduced for tank tie-downs S.211 that did not pass during the 2011 session.



Pittsfield, September 12, 2011

Debris Teams

Debris was a hot topic of conversation with questions ranging from what and how to remove material to who is responsible for debris removal to how to recover the expense and whether FEMA would cover removal costs. To complicate matters, the type of debris – gravel, woody, or building material – could impact the response and solution.

In order to help communities manage the issue of woody debris, the Agency of Natural Resources in partnership with AOT initiated 'Debris Teams' to assess streams that had woody debris and answer questions on removal and the potential impacts on the community. At the Community Recovery Partnership meetings, attendees were able to request a team visit to assess a particular stretch of a local river or learn if that stretch had been previously assessed by one of the teams. Response time to requests was quick - teams generally arrived in less than a week after a call.

Rochester and Waitsfield Meeting:

Issue: Participants noted that cell towers along Route 100 were expected to be activated before the storm and yet were months behind. Residents felt that cell communication would greatly enhance recovery efforts.

Resolution: VEM contacted providers and the cell towers were turned on.

Rochester Meeting:

Issue: Town officials noted the difficulty of properly disposing of hazardous materials that the town removed and was storing in the town garage.

Issue: Participants suggested a bigger Green Up day to help towns and residents address the ongoing debris issue.

Resolution: ANR staff followed up with financial assistance for the proper disposal of the material.

Resolution: The State organized Green Up to Recover and partnered with Green Up Day to increase visibility of the ongoing need and volunteer efforts. Over 300 volunteer coordinators in 235 towns with over 15,000 volunteers joined forces. An extra 5,000 trash bags were ordered for Green Up Day. In Waterbury alone, 45 volunteers helped pull 1,500 tires out of the Winooski River.

Sharon Meeting:

Issue: Communities requested information on federal funding status in order to aid in budgeting and to assist selectboards in preparation for Town Meeting.

Issue: Community members noted misinformation and misperceptions on how rivers function and requested information and training on river dynamics.

Resolution: IRO prepared guidance documents for towns and legislators and the Secretary of State's Office is working with towns to ease cash flow issues (see www.vtstrong.vermont.gov).

Resolution: ANR river dynamics video was posted on www.vtstrong.vermont.gov. ANR staff also worked with Preservation Trust of Vermont on workshops on river dynamics and protecting historic resources and centers.

Waitsfield Meeting:

Issue: Meeting participants requested a statewide assessment of mobile home parks, evaluating risks and options for rebuilding or relocating these homes.

Resolution: ACCD submitted a proposal for a Hazard Mitigation Grant to address this issue and successfully worked with the legislature to support this work. The Vermont Housing and Conservation Board is also working on a project to identify alternatives to mobile homes that are energy efficient, cost effective and located out of flood ways.

"One of the great things about living in Vermont is that the same person who would give you a dressing down in a town meeting wouldn't think twice about helping you out of a ditch. I got to see so many examples of neighbors not thinking twice about helping. For each town it was a little different. Each community is its own unique extended family and whether it was one town bringing another a covered dish in the form of a grader or a truck, or unpaid selectboard members dropping everything to make sure that vulnerable people were taken care of, it happened all up and down the line. The scale and method varied from town to town, but the caring was every bit as personal in Rutland as it was in Stockbridge.

I will continue to work with these communities as the Agency of Transportation works with them to restore their infrastructure. I am very sensitive to what they have all been through and I will carry that understanding with me as we work through the process of helping them manage projects and their impacts. We're working to ensure that they will be in a better position to withstand future events. My encounters with these towns when the wounds were still fresh will help me be a better partner in making sure that our controlled disruptions will be as painless as possible."

Erik Filkorn, Public Outreach Manager,
Agency of Transportation

Waterbury Meeting:

Issue: Information was requested on techniques to mitigate mold in water-damaged homes.

Resolution: Information on the right way to remediate buildings was posted on www.vtstrong.vermont.gov.

Windham County Meeting:

Issue: Participants identified concerns over federal rules directing the bulk of the Community Development Block Grant Disaster Funding to Washington and Windsor Counties.

Issue: Community members requested improved tools to overcome the limits of FEMA flood maps along with needed financial resources to better plan for the next event.

Resolution: Working with Vermont's Congressional Delegation, ACCD requested, and HUD approved, a waiver to distribute more funding to Windham County.

Resolution: ACCD with ANR, AOT, VAPDA and other partners is applying for EDA funding to provide information on the intersection of risk and economic development activities and to develop strategies to protect those business activities.

"At meeting after meeting I was moved by the strength of those who had lost their homes, livelihoods and, in some cases, entire communities. And at how grateful they were that we were there to listen and, yet, reluctant to ask for help. It made me realize the importance of looking past that strength to see the true urgency of what survivors need. The state must be prepared to help, whenever they are ready to ask for it."

Jennifer Hollar, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Economic, Housing and Community Development

Barre City: Lessons from the Spring Helped Prepare for Irene

Immediately after the 2011 spring floods, Barre City officials went door-to-door to connect with residents and survey damage. On Day One, basic disaster information and business cards were distributed; residents were advised to wait until the FEMA process started before undertaking major projects and incurring major costs.

From Day Two to Day Five, the city planner took 860 pictures of damage and created a map of the impact. Short term, these images were helpful for the city's Department of Public Works to assess areas that required immediate attention while the town examined patterns of damage over a longer term period. One outcome of the assessment was that curbed streets generally fared better than others. Based on the experience of spring floods, Barre City spent a week clearing culverts and preparing for Irene. By pursuing FEMA pre-disaster mitigation funding and planning, damages from Irene were minimized.

Key Findings

The CRP meetings captured a snapshot of where communities were in the recovery process at that moment; accomplishments were highlighted and priorities and ideas for the future conveyed.

One of the team's initial assumptions about where communities were in the recovery process was quickly dispelled. Before the meetings, the team envisioned more discussion would occur around local rebuilding ideas, ways to mitigate and prevent damage from the next event and suggestions for how best to direct state resources. Instead, participants, especially at initial meetings, wanted to share stories and suggestions for improvement around immediate response. As meetings progressed, the team did hear more about how communities were planning for the future. This was particularly true at the Barre meeting as towns in this region had also experienced the spring storm floods so were several months ahead in the recovery process with preliminary plans developed to reduce future damage.

Throughout the meetings, central themes emerged along with lessons learned that are summarized on the following pages. One vital and universal theme was that communities were very proud of how they had stepped up, grown stronger and become more self-sufficient. In the days after the water subsided, many communities were isolated and realized that those that were able had to help residents inventory damage, establish shelters, etc. Community members of diverse backgrounds and experiences leveraged their collective talents and expertise and found ways to utilize proven wisdom, practical skills and "can do" spirit.

The following lessons identified are relevant for individuals, farms, businesses, communities and state agencies alike. Each section provides a lens for assessing what is needed to be better prepared in the future.

Emergency Response Planning: Preparation Made a Difference in Response

While it may seem like common sense, planning works. Communities that had taken the time to carefully develop their emergency response plans, choose “point people” with experience and hold regular meetings and drills responded in a more coordinated, efficient and effective manner.

Lessons Learned:

- **Develop a Plan:** Take the time to draft an Emergency Response Plan – for your home, your business or your community. Use the process as an opportunity to bring stakeholders (community members, employees, family members) together to discuss the roles needed during an emergency (infrastructure, housing, communication, etc.) and how best to assign those roles.
- **Choose Coordinators with Care:** Stories emerged of Emergency Coordinators unaware they were chosen because they had not attended Town Meeting (and therefore could not refuse the post) or adding the responsibility to the duties of the Road Foreman or the Selectboard Chair. In such cases, when the event hit, these “point people” were either too busy (because they had multiple job functions after the disaster) or they did not understand the responsibilities of the job. The same was true of the people chosen by some state agencies to work at the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC). Find a coordinator that has the skills and experience to respond in an emergency situation. Make sure that they understand the emergency management plans, know the other point people involved, and are authorized to make decisions.
- **Assign Alternates:** Make sure that there are individuals assigned as alternates for various response positions. That way if the primary contact is not able to perform his or her duties, or the work demands 24 hour attention, someone else that is trained and informed can step in. Many emergency responders suggested having a bench that was “three deep” is a sound strategy.
- **Hold Regular Meetings:** Make sure that emergency responders (or your staff or family members) are brought together on a regular basis to update the Emergency Response Plan, discuss options for supporting each other and run desk drills on a potential disaster. Bring in a variety of stakeholders from your community, your family members or various departments within your business. Also consider hosting joint meetings with neighboring towns and state partners.
- **Consider the Whole Community:** When developing plans, consider individuals with special needs and those with pets, or livestock. Often emergency shelters could not accommodate special

Recovery is Happening

Bartleby's Books Reopens, Wilmington

Damage from Irene



Rebuilt and Reopened



needs and did not consider how to care for house pets for those that needed to be evacuated. Documenting those with special needs can also help identify medical or service needs if roads and power are out. Some people refuse to leave their pets or their livestock to evacuate so reaching out to local animal rescue groups or agricultural organizations and setting up a plan before a disaster can help ensure people are safe.

- **Workshops, Drills and Exercises Matter:** Practice, review, modify, practice. It makes a difference. People know their roles, how they fit with responders and who to call.
- **Pay Attention to Emergency Alerts:** Some towns, businesses and individual paid attention to the emergency alerts coming from Vermont Emergency Management and cleared gutters, storm drains and detention ponds, got emergency shelters ready, moved key documents to safety, made sure needed equipment was placed in key accessible areas and contacted volunteers. Others were unaware of or ignored such alerts and as a result, did not prepare before Irene hit.

Response After an Event: Communication is Key

A broad-based communication strategy was important as was identifying key contacts in neighboring towns, as well as at the regional and state level.

Lessons Learned:

- **Broad Based Communication Needed:** Some towns used social media (Facebook, Twitter, Front Porch Forum) while others printed newsletters, emailed or went door-to-door with information. Across the board, the need for broad and redundant communication was noted—for example, door-to-door via foot, ATV, bike or horseback, newsletters, town meetings, local radio stations, etc. Do not assume everyone has a computer, internet access, cell phone, electricity or Facebook.
- **Keep Information Current:** If a business, town or state office is flooded and an alternative space is located, update contact information on websites, email addresses and outgoing phone messages. Make sure that alternative email and cell phones are in place.
- **Develop a Communication Tree:** Some businesses used phone trees while towns and state agencies used reverse 911 to alert residents or employees. This can be an automated system that is pre-programmed before an event.
- **Clear Coordination and Communication between Entities:** While some towns coordinated well with their neighboring towns or with the various state agencies, other towns felt that things did not work as smoothly as possible. Pre-planning and establishing working relations prior to the event helped smooth the way after the event as did appointing emergency responders that were familiar with contacts in neighboring towns, regional entities and state agencies.

“It was very powerful to listen to residents speak about volunteer efforts to deliver food or medicine, evacuate those at risk of flooding, rebuild destroyed homes, and counsel those who needed to apply for FEMA assistance. We were impressed and motivated to hear the level of understanding and appreciation for how local land use decisions can impact hazard vulnerability. We also heard residents in Rochester wonder aloud if realtors understood the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) and whether they conveyed that to home and business owners.”

After the meetings, Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee staff followed up with residents who presented special circumstances and were struggling to receive adequate instructions on how to proceed with their property. We are working with Vermont Emergency Management to revise the format and content of emergency operation plans to make them more user-friendly and applicable in times of crisis. As a result of the realtor question in Rochester, we designed a floodplain training course for local realtors and secured continuing education certification. The course is now being offered on a regular basis. We also stepped up to help our member towns with applications for Public Assistance through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and with the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP).”

Peter Gregory, Executive Director
Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee
Regional Commission



Public-Private Partnerships: I Am Vermont Strong License Plates

After Irene, fundraising efforts began across the state. The Vermont Disaster Relief Fund (VDRF) was formed to aid survivors. One of the fundraising efforts to support the fund is the sale of “I am Vermont Strong” license plates. The Governor, Department of Motor Vehicles, and other state agencies, VDRF, the legislature and many private businesses came together to make this license plate a reality. Vermont Life provided online sales. Eric Mallette and Lyz Tomsunden, native Vermonters living in Rutland, started a Facebook campaign with an image and a strong message of hope and strength to help those impacted by Irene. That turned into a business selling T-shirts with the “I am Vermont Strong” image and proceeds supported recovery efforts. Eric and Lyz graciously provided permission for their image to be used on the license plate. Other businesses (including Cabot, Jay Peak Resort, Liberty Hill Farm, and Vermont Attractions Association) stepped up and offered prizes that could be found in the packaging of the license plates while still others such as Heritage Ford, Jay Peak, Sugarbush, Casella Waste Management, and the Vermont Grocers Association purchased bulk orders. This is just one example of public and private entities coming together to support recovery efforts. As of August 28th, 2012 33,000 plates have been sold which is past the halfway mark towards a \$1 million fundraising goal. Proceeds go to the Vermont Disaster Relief Fund and the Vermont Foodbank.

- **Public Works Mutual Aid:** Several towns had inter-town agreements in place before Irene that established how they would help in the event of a disaster, and detailed payment structure and liability. Having a signed inter-local agreement before an event allowed support to hit the ground running as well as provided necessary documentation to FEMA for reimbursements.
- **Improved Communications Infrastructure Needed:** Lack of cell coverage was a problem in some communities. An important action item identified at several meetings was that “the state needs full coverage or some system to ensure that holes in coverage are filled.” There is a need to ensure that a system exists to assure towers have emergency backup power.
- **Clear, Consistent Decision-Making at State Level Needed:** From a community perspective, information and answers to questions were not always consistent when dealing with state agencies. Some agencies or departments within agencies did develop a clear decision-making tree and ensured that people answering questions or making decisions had the authority to do so. At other agencies, this was not as consistent. It is an issue that participants at the community meetings asked to be addressed.
- **Document and Learn from Tropical Storm Irene Experience:** Participants do not want to forget the lessons learned from this event. They want their towns, Regional Planning Commissions and state agencies to update emergency planning documents, capture the lessons learned and incorporate this experience into materials.

Response After an Event: Partnerships Are Critical

No one individual, business, organization, town or state agency can tackle a crisis alone. Partners, collaborators, and volunteers are all critical components in response and recovery efforts.

Lessons Learned:

- **The Same Word can have Different Meanings:** The key to partnerships is a strong foundation based on understanding of each other’s work, perspective and programs. Traveling together, and listening to the answers to questions, increased awareness about each other’s work and helped state agencies build a strong partnership foundation with each other, with local communities and with other partner organizations. We learned that terms can have very different meaning depending on the “working lens” and it was important to define those terms to ensure we were moving in the same direction for response and recovery. For example, “infrastructure can mean bridges and roads, homes and businesses, or streams and rivers” depending on who is speaking. Make sure terms are clearly defined.

- **Local, Flexible Fundraising was Important:** Many of the communities visited already had a local fund that provided support in the community. Some had a community-based fund like the one in the Mad River Valley, while others were faith-based like the “Waterbury Good Neighbor Fund.” Those communities that did not have a fund often quickly established one. Social networking and local fundraisers helped augment the existing funds or supplied the seed for new funds. These organizations were nimble and able to quickly infuse resources to local residents, and businesses that made a huge difference the days, weeks and months after Irene.
- **“Quick” Money is Important:** After a disaster, businesses do not have the same access to FEMA grants. Thus, many meeting participants mentioned the importance of the Vermont Economic Development Authority (VEDA) disaster loan program. While still a loan and not a grant, many noted that quick turn around and low-level bureaucracy made a difference in how fast a business was able to clean up and re-open. This, along with local fundraising efforts and the Vermont Irene Flood Relief Fund, which made small grants (\$2,000-5,000) to businesses, provided much needed support. In contrast, the Small Business Administration loans were cited as difficult to fill out, successful applications were few and large hurdles existed to overcome.
- **FEMA Assistance Critical but Insufficient:** Prior to Irene, Vermont had little experience with major disasters and the roles played by FEMA and Small Business Administration (SBA). Soon it became clear that while FEMA’s Individual Assistance program provided critical early help to survivors, it is designed only to meet basic needs. SBA assistance was difficult to access and delivered in the form of loan which many Vermonters were reluctant to accept. Additional public and private resources, such as the Vermont Community Fund, Vermont Disaster Relief Fund, Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery Fund and the Vermont Irene Flood Relief Fund are required to stabilize survivors situations and enable them to recover. Coordination between partners is essential.
- **Carefully Review Insurance Policies:** At nearly every meeting the concern was raised that the financial response from insurance companies and other funders has been insufficient, slow, confusing and sometimes unclear and unfair. This perception was referenced in the context of individuals, towns and businesses. One lesson learned was the need for a careful policy review, not just with the insurance agent, but also with a lawyer, as well as the need to run various scenarios to see how the policy would apply or not apply. Many noted that even their insurance agents thought they would be fully covered for flood issues and were not.
- **Volunteers Helped Enormously:** Towns, businesses, farmers and residents were very grateful to the volunteers who showed up and assisted in so many ways. Community residents were appreciative and touched by people’s efforts to pitch in and “help a stranger” tackle any number of tasks. VTResponse (<http://vtresponse.wordpress.com>) did a tremendous job in the year after

Recovery is Happening Beyond Imagination, Wilmington

Damage from Irene



A new business getting ready to open in Oct. 2012



Irene in setting up a web-based system to link survivor need to volunteer assistance. Communities also noted that it was helpful to have someone act as a volunteer coordinator on the ground. That ensured the right volunteers were matched with community need, and were qualified to address the need which ensured a smooth work flow.

- **Regional Perspective and Coordination was Critical:** FEMA typically coordinates with county governments and was not prepared to work with cities and towns one-on-one. Likewise, participants acknowledged the critical role that the Regional Planning Commissions played in coordinating and communicating information from FEMA and state agencies to the local municipalities. State agencies, especially the Agencies of Transportation and Natural Resources, relied on them to identify local roads and streams that were impacted.
- **Municipalities Need Help:** The responsibility and complexity of response and recovery was difficult for some towns to manage, particularly those with few, if any, paid staff. While recovery begins locally, the state and RPCs must be ready partners.
- **FEMA - Consider the People Impacted:** Participants mentioned that it was important for FEMA to realize that those impacted also held jobs that they were required to be at during regular business hours. Thus, sending FEMA personnel door-to-door or having help centers open at the same hour meant missing the information or having to give up a day's work in order to get information critical to recovery. One suggestion was longer hours during the week and/or weekend hours.

Longterm Recovery

Longterm recovery was mentioned in several meetings, but with a “big picture” lens and not with details and lessons learned. During the meetings, we did hear requests that will be further addressed in the Recommendations section of this report. For example, communities wanted:

- to know how they could rebuild in a way that lessened the impact from future events
- a clearer understanding of river and watershed dynamics
- to know how to live with the rivers and mitigate or remove buildings and infrastructure from harm's way

“I became aware of each community's ability to look beyond what has divided them in the past and work collaboratively to address everyone's critical needs during and after the disaster.”

We have tried to use this collaborative spirit to guide the Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Recovery funding program. So many people want to help and finding a way for them to contribute is critical.”

Josh Hanford,
Director of Community Development Program,
Agency of Commerce and Community Development

The Lights Are Back On Latchis Theatre, Brattleboro

Reopened after Irene



Ongoing Recovery Needs

Over the course of the meetings, issues were raised that participants hoped would be addressed at an individual, local, regional or state level to aid in recovery or to ensure that lessons learned were incorporated so that future response would be efficient and effective. Many of these recommendations and action items could also apply to homeowners and businesses. Issues raised along with response that has occurred or is underway are summarized below.

Re-Evaluate and Update Emergency Plans:

As mentioned, preparation for an emergency is critical. Individuals, businesses, municipalities and the state all must revise, drill and further refine their emergency plans. Each should examine their resources to respond, and identify gaps in those resources and how best to fill them – whether through a grant for additional generators or via a multi-town agreement. There is also a need to review, assess, and modify plans for continuity of operations, and records management.

Response to Date:

This is an ongoing process and is at different stages in homes, businesses, communities and state agencies. Examples include:

- Revisions to the State Emergency Operations Plan is ongoing and expected to be completed by October 26, 2012.
- Changes to the Basic Local Emergency Operations Plan format have been integrated into all new updates.
- Several organizations including the Vermont Small Business Development Centers, Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Regional Commission and the Craft Emergency Relief Fund are working on materials and workshops to aid businesses in emergency planning, continuity of operations and diversifying funding streams.

Continued Need for Volunteer Support:

Communities mentioned a continued need for volunteers for rebuilding efforts for homes and businesses as well as clean up, debris removal and replanting efforts.

Response to Date:

Many communities have continued to have a volunteer coordinator matching need with volunteers.

- The Irene Recovery Office worked with Green Up Vermont to expand “Green Up Day” to

“I was struck by the ability of individuals to identify what they and their neighbors needed in the immediate aftermath of the storm – and to do something about delivering it. I say this because we heard so many stories of people stepping up and finding ways to make things happen which was critical given how stretched everyone’s resources were. Folks didn’t wait and that was a good thing.”

There is no doubt that we at the state level have an obligation to learn from the event, organizationally, and to be better prepared in the future. This includes having more robust internal and external communications systems and more creative ways to get out to individuals, communities and municipalities. We have already begun more cross-training so that we will be able to bring more people in to deal with resource shortages – such as river engineers.”

Justin Johnson, Deputy Commissioner
Department of Environmental Conservation,
Agency of Natural Resources



**Green Up
to Recover**

**Get involved in
your community!**

**For a list of Vermont’s
ongoing recovery
projects, click here!**

Promoted on various partner websites.

include recovery efforts and has worked with SerVermont to continue volunteer recruitment and coordination efforts, including the launch of a Facebook page in July 2012.

- In addition, the IRO and SerVermont have worked together with other agencies to help the Longterm Recovery Committees provide assistance to individuals and families and develop the capacity to manage volunteer resources.

Insurance Process Needs Improvement:

Many positive comments were received about the guidance provided by the former Department of Banking, Insurance, Securities and Health Care (now the Department of Financial Regulation - DFR). Having a designated phone and person to answer insurance-related questions was appreciated. However, at almost every meeting, participants raised the issue of insurance companies – both private and the National Flood Insurance Program - noting that response varied, inconsistent and slow in coming. DFR staff noted that property and casualty insurance that they regulate in Vermont were very responsive, collaborative and supportive of their clients with very few complaints.

Response to Date:

The Department of Financial Regulation has and will continue to expand and enhance customer outreach and education with updated bulletins, tips and alerts on their website (<http://www.dfr.vermont.gov/insurance/home>). From conversations with Vermonters, DFR staff realized that many individuals thought that their homeowners insurance covered flooding. However, flood insurance is in fact provided through a separate flood insurance policy through the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). DFR also recommends that businesses consider business interruption insurance which can help in cases like Irene. DFR's goal is to ensure that consumers are informed and can thoughtfully prepare and respond in case of an emergency or disaster.

State Must be Resilient:

Communities are looking to state agencies to lead in longterm recovery efforts and align programs, policies and funding to ensure that we are rebuilding in a manner that strengthens and protects communities. They want the state to lead and set the example for wise land-use, information sharing and cooperation with policies and programs to integrate land-use, regional plans, downtown redevelopment, housing, transportation, environment, working lands and economic development.

Response to Date:

State agencies are working on many fronts to respond to this need identified in the CRP meetings, including:

- State agencies are reviewing and updating internal policies and programs with a flood lens.

Recovery is Happening

Chapman's Antiques, Wilmington

Damage from Irene



Chapman Antiques opens a satellite store



- VEM is leading efforts on the State’s After Action Report and Improvement Plan with support from other state agencies to ensure what we heard at these and other meetings is incorporated into future events. Progress on Improvement Plan implementation will be reviewed by the Homeland Security Advisory Council semi-annually. An Emergency Preparedness Conference in Killington was held on September 17 & 18, 2012.
- ACCD is leading a pilot project in cooperation with ANR, AOT, the Mad River Valley Planning District and Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission to evaluate local, regional and state policies and identify areas where they do and do not promote flood mitigation and protection measures. This initiative is funded through the US. Environmental Protection Agency’s Smart Growth Technical Assistance Program.
- ANR and AOT are developing joint training programs for emergency response and longterm resiliency efforts that will be delivered at the AOT training site and in the field. Key audiences will be heavy equipment operators, field supervisors and design engineers.
- AOT is conducting a transportation corridor resiliency study in cooperation with ANR, ACCD, and the Regional Planning Commissions.
- Work was completed in the 2012 Legislative Session with S.202 to: increase incentives, education, and support for municipalities to adopt more protective river corridor and floodplain bylaws; initiate state regulation of municipally-exempt activities in flood hazard areas; initiate state regulation of instream emergency protective measures, and assist municipalities with the assessment, mapping, mitigation measures within sensitive river corridors where infrastructure and community assets may be at a high risk for inundation and fluvial erosion-related damages. Act 138 emergency rules will be coming out next year and floodplain rules in 2014.
- The Irene Recovery Office is working with the Institute for Sustainable Communities on a Resilient Vermont project to help support recovery efforts at the community and state level, and identify implementation strategies and areas for improvement.
- As of August 28th, the Vermont Disaster Relief Fund has provided direct assistance to 142 families with \$1.7 million in aid and has a goal of raising funds to help bridge the gap of the estimated \$10 million to help 700 remaining households recover.
- The Agency of Agriculture partnered with the Vermont Community Foundation on the Vermont Farm Disaster Relief Fund. As of August 2012, they have awarded \$1,576,300 to 177 farmers. A second round of funding was announced in August.
- ANR is working to ensure communities understand and update their flood regulations and support local zoning administrators in their efforts to enforce those regulations that ensure buildings are not placed in harm’s way.

“I realized how critical it was for people before, during and after the storm to develop good communications – formal plans for disaster communication, informal outreach, high-tech methods like Facebook, low-tech solutions like signs on the road, newsletters, daily organizational meetings, radio broadcasts, door to door visits, etc. Those communities that used multiple layers of communications to connect with each other and that established a central gathering place for regular face-to-face contact, told inspirational stories of community cohesion, mutual support and resourceful problem-solving.

While it is impossible to maintain the same level of intensity that comes with a shared disaster, I think about how the multiple layers of communication can be used to address on-going community concerns, like the often difficult, longterm work of making flood-prone communities more resilient.”

Faith Ingulsrud, Planning Coordinator
Agency of Commerce and Community Development

Central State Coordinating Entity:

Communities wanted a central hub in state government to lead, develop, and coordinate the recovery policies and activities of state agencies and partners and work to strategically leverage limited resources.

Response to Date:

- Governor Shumlin created the Irene Recovery Office (IRO) which will remain in place until December 2012. The office was led in the initial months following the storm by Neale Lunderville and in 2012 by Sue Minter.
- Agencies came together and developed a website – www.vtstrong.vermont.gov - to serve as the clearinghouse for information; keep the public updated on the status of the recovery; develop case studies of lessons learned; and share community recovery stories.
- IRO with partner agencies VEM and AOT are actively working to assist municipalities with federal reimbursements and any appeals.
- IRO is also directing efforts to review state and local policies that expedite action during disasters –waivers, exceptions, inter-local agreements, incident command centers, special conditions (sediment and debris removal) - to speed the response and recovery from the next disaster.
- Agency of Human Services and Agency of Agriculture have received funding to provide ongoing case management in order to assist families and farmers in longterm recovery efforts.
- ACCD worked with FEMA, the Governor’s office, the Vermont Community Foundation, the Vermont Disaster Relief Fund and other public and private partners to maximize FEMA assistance to mobile homeowners.

Additional Training and Guidance:

Participants recognized that expertise about river science and watershed management was often lacking in their community, especially among local select and planning board members. Those that had received training before the flood commented on how it helped them better understand the ties to land use and infrastructure planning and how local decisions had an impact on where water went and how fast it flowed during a flood event. They felt that additional training and guidance documents would be important.

Response to Date:

- ANR teamed up with Preservation Trust of Vermont (PTV) to provide trainings in communities around the state on river management, mitigating and flood proofing historic buildings and how to protect our historic centers that are often located in floodplains.

Open Again in Record Time

1836 Country Store, *Wilmington*

Damage from Irene



After Rebuilding



- One of the deliverables for the pilot project in the Mad River Valley will be guidance documents and checklists for towns on ways to improve and integrate their land use plans, policies and by-laws, hazard mitigation plans and river corridor management plans.
- ANR will create and deliver public education on river dynamics, watershed management, floodplain maps and what it means to individuals, National Flood Insurance Programs, and local decision making.
- Some of the regional planning commissions are working to develop programs that provide training and technical assistance to communities regarding local land use plans and policies (bylaws) that support floodplain management and reduce future risk.
- ANR is also seeking funding to expedite watershed/ hydrological studies to guide planning and development decisions. ANR plans to place information and maps online in a form easily accessed and used by the public and also map areas for safe development. ANR also currently partners with the Vermont League of Cities and Towns to assist communities with floodplain issues.

Ongoing Financial Shortfalls:

Participants at meetings– homeowners, businesses and towns–all raised concerns about the shortfall between need and available funding. This will be an ongoing issue, especially given the current federal funding concerns.

Response to Date:

- State Treasurer Beth Pearce has been working with communities to assist with cash flow and provide leeway with state payment dates.
- A Small Business Champions Team (which included ACCD, Vermont Business for Social Responsibility, VT Small Business Development Center, VEDA, Institute for Sustainable Communities and the Regional Development Corporations) was formed to identify ongoing needs of small businesses. ACCD and others are working on finding funding for additional technical assistance, recapitalizing the VEDA flood response program and helping to identify key changes to protect area of economic activity.
- The IRO continues to advocate for towns and state agencies with FEMA.
- ACCD received \$21.7 million in Community Development Block Grant funding for disaster recovery. It has drafted an action plan for the use of the funds and sent it to HUD after reviewing and responding to public input. HUD approval of the plan is imminent and ACCD is able to accept applications. More information can be found at (http://accd.vermont.gov/strong_communities/opportunities/funding/cdbgdr).

“The one thing that continues to amaze me is that people who volunteered and helped so much, said (with characteristic Vermont modesty), ‘This is what anyone would have done; I did what I could; others were worse off than me; I didn’t do much.’ And people who were the recipients of help said that help was a lifeline; a tremendous, overwhelming outpouring they will never forget that pulled them through the days and weeks (52 of them) after the flood and kept them rooted in their community.”

The other less uplifting thing we hear is that despite all the help, for a lot of people progress is really slow, dealing with the federal government continues to be discouraging and they will never fully recover from the damage wrought by Irene. We can only keep working to assure that as many as possible are able to move on.”

Karen Horn, Director of Public Policy and Advocacy,
Vermont League of Cities and Towns

Conclusion

The Community Recovery Partnership had many tangible and intangible outcomes. First, it was important for state agency staff to leave their offices and engage with the communities that were impacted. We learned a great deal from each other, our partners and those in the communities that we visited. We put a face to the names on websites and provided an avenue for communities to make a connection and receive answers. Questions were answered and myths dispelled during and after the meetings in one-on-one follow up. The information we heard and the suggestions provided laid the foundation for many of the regional and state initiatives that have been and will be developed. The state made clear its commitment to support communities throughout the recovery process.

State agencies learned more about each other's skills and programs that have grown and strengthened over the past year. Institutionalizing these relationships has also begun with the co-location of ACCD, ANR and AOT at National Life building in Montpelier, and the many collaborative projects underway or planned.

Vermont's honesty, compassion and community spirit displayed at these meetings was truly humbling. People came, constructively raised concerns, suggested ideas and laid out their needs. That spirit and attitude has impacted and directed the work of state agencies and our partners to find solutions to ongoing individual, business and community needs.

Recovery is underway around the state, but we are by no means "recovered." We must remember that there are different stages of this process and bring the Vermont cooperative, "can do" spirit to each stage. We must continue to listen, improve and look forward. Together we can rebuild stronger, smarter and safer.



Governor Peter Shumlin, CRP meeting in Sharon, VT