

## Climate Action Input Session: Rural Resilience and Town Support

Friday, November 15, 12:00-1:30pm

### Summary of Input

*hosted by the Rural Resilience and Adaptation Subcommittee  
of the Vermont Climate Council*

#### Overview

The Vermont Climate Council is updating the state's Climate Action Plan. Subcommittees of the Council are holding a series of virtual public meetings to get input on their initial ideas for the update.

This document summarizes input during a session on November 15, 2024, focused on supporting the climate resilience of rural towns, with a focus on hearing from organizations and entities that support municipalities. Approximately 50 people attended the 90-minute Zoom meeting. A participant list is included below.

This document is not a transcript of the session, but rather an overview of themes and ideas that participants provided verbally, in the chat, or subsequently over email to Vermont's Climate Action Office.

The session began with a presentation on the Climate Action Plan updating process and emerging ideas from the Public Health, Community Capacity, and Building/Infrastructure Task Groups of the Council's Rural Resilience and Adaptation Subcommittee.

- View presentation [slides](#).
- View discussion [questions](#).
- View the input session [recording](#).

#### Summary of input

##### High-level summary

At the end of the input session, participants were asked to answer the question, "what themes are jumping out?" They offered short phrases as responses, which are grouped below.

*Many comments focused on the importance of local, regional, and state collaboration on climate resilience and emergency planning, preparedness, and recovery*

- Community-led resilience planning
- Community-oriented training sessions on how to be prepared for extended power outages
- Building local communication, collaboration, and coordination for preparedness, response, and recovery
- Support municipal capacity. They can't do it on their own.
- Implementing specific capacity needs
- Regional coordination support as well as capacity for organized response and recovery
- Coordination among various resilience efforts statewide

*Other comments focused specifically on planning efforts*

- Pre-planning work with capital budgets
- Locally-led participatory budgeting for community resilience investments
- Pre-incident preparation (what can you do before an incident to make recovery less of a lift)
- Taking action on the plans, not just planning

*Several comments focused on developing and expanding access to existing resources*

- Knowledge of and access to existing planning mechanisms and resources
- Fund pre-existing service delivery infrastructure
- Build out what exists and works well
- Compensation to secure current volunteer positions
- Assistance with documentation for FEMA reimbursement
- Community engagement through existing stakeholders

*Participants highlighted other key themes and takeaways as well*

- Efficiency
- Food access and security
- Social resilience and connections needed

**Detailed summary**

Below is a more detailed summary of input provided verbally during the conversation, in the chat, and from subsequent emails, grouped by theme within the relevant Task Group category.

## **Building/ Infrastructure:**

### *Supporting infrastructural resilience and preserving agricultural lands*

- **Historical damage to Vermont's wetlands** – Vermont has lost nearly 50% of historic wetland areas due to excavation, draining, dredging, etc.
- Need **funding and technical support to enhance infrastructural resilience**, could collaborate with environmental groups to plan and execute restoration that supports biodiversity.
- **Upland flooding is a challenge** and we need to figure out how to address that in hazard mitigation plans when the FEMA maps are out of date. During recent storms, brooks turned into dangerous rivers that take out houses.
  - Municipalities could use help with mapping these hazard areas and recognize the critical need to maintain and conserve headwater forests to buffer flows.
- **Identifying vulnerable infrastructure** for towns would be helpful. Stormwater Master Plans developed by the state are a good model. Those plans identify the main stormwater contributors in towns, rank them based on priority/impact, and provide possible restoration options. Something similar regarding the vulnerability of critical infrastructure could be valuable to towns.
- **Vegetative buffers (100 feet or more) on top of hilltops/slopes** are effective in preventing shallow landslides. Can there be an incentive or more economic support for farmers, loggers, etc. who want/need to get as much out of their land as possible to do this? Ideally we'd have not only a river corridor policy, but a unified stream and river buffer policy that would require maintaining vegetation. Vegetation, especially trees and understory, will not stop all fluvial erosion, but it is certainly much worse in the absence of vegetation.
- **Support initiatives to restore floodplain areas** and state initiatives to preserve agricultural soils and lands for local and regional use.
- **Prime agricultural soils should be preserved** when towns make bylaws and zoning decisions, along with making good development decisions that affect prime agricultural soils. There are partner organizations (Vermont Land Trust) who help farmers preserve farms and also wetland areas.

### *Housing*

- We need to begin conversations on **how to get settlements away from flood hazard areas and make them more wildland fire adaptive**. As an example, we did a planning

charrette with a public engagement process about where housing might be developed in towns close to compact settlements and away from flood hazard areas.

- Fully **consider how any planned actions to address climate change may contribute to or worsen the [housing crisis](#)** that Vermont is currently facing. Vermont currently has one of the highest populations of homeless residents in the country, with numbers increasing in recent years. The cost of housing has gone up so steeply in the past 5 years that it has pushed Vermonters who have never before struggled with housing at all out of their housing completely.
- **The state needs a comprehensive plan for how to safely move homeowners out of floodplains and find new, affordable housing** in safe areas of the same town/county. There is a desire to support buying out homes in floodplains. Yet, the question asked when discussing buyouts with homeowners is – where do I go? Many of the homeowners in buyouts are older, have owned their home for decades, and are on set incomes. Strongly encourage this committee to consider safe relocation communities, especially in towns with higher numbers of buyouts. Need funding and technical expertise for this.
- **This plan lacks consideration of how to keep people in their homes.** Weatherization, elevations, and efficient use of resources in homes are merely part of this in a state with such an acute housing crisis. Long-term Recovery Groups (LTRGs) support over 250 households in the buyout process to repair their flood-damaged housing enough to temporarily remain in their homes.
- **There must be significantly more financial support for village/city/town/community wastewater projects in order to promote compact development** and promote additional housing. Wastewater is often the biggest impediment to constructing new housing, particularly for larger projects and for village infill. Absent the necessary infrastructure, no regulatory change is going to sufficiently increase compact development.
- **Consider the additional municipal support towns need for more housing and growth.** For example, Waitsfield just changed its zoning to increase building heights from 2 to 3 stories. However, Waitsfield does not have the fire equipment for this increased building height (ladder truck).

### **Community Capacity:**

*Capacity-building and accessing funding*

- **In very rural communities, the biggest challenge is lack of resources for the people needed** to carry out planning, grant writing, grant administration, and the research it takes to find funding that helps communities be more resilient.
  - Long-term recovery groups are all volunteers and get burnt out quickly with multiple storms.
  - Small towns have a lot of turnover in government officials which means experience dealing with prior floods and not enough people to stay on top of it all.
- **Non-profit organizations are also struggling with funding for staff like grantwriters and bookkeepers.** We are looking for ways to share resources with other networks (i.e. pooling).
- **Need to build out capacity and collaborative efforts.** There are small pockets of great work happening in Vermont, but the lack of county/regional government limits the ability to tell others what work is being done.
- **Municipalities need tech support and assistance pursuing grants.** Challenge for municipalities is navigating different systems and having volunteers responsible for doing this work.
- **Advocate for regional government structures as a way to put power in the hands of the community.** We know each community is distinct and has distinct needs and should be able to do their own planning because they know their area's needs.
- **Lack of county government is a unique feature of doing disaster work in VT.** We have projects that could be done at the county level more efficiently than trying to build them from scratch.
  - There is a study UVM is doing, funded by the Legislature last year, to look at regional or other governance opportunities/networks given we do not have county government.
  - If participants support the creation of county government, let your legislature know. One caveat is that RPCs will need authority granted by the State, along with funding and staff.
- **Towns need modeling (i.e. hydrology, flood, etc.) but lack the tools.** Has worked with the Lincoln Lab at MIT which has been a great tool and could solve this problem. For 100 million dollars, Vermont could be the test case that helps develop this tool.
- **There is a lot of FEMA overlay and resources.** Towns need help knowing what is available and applying for it.
- Towns have **hazard mitigation plans** that come out of RPCs and generally are part of FEMA's model of funding. Hazard mitigation plans allow municipalities to qualify for FEMA funded National Flood Insurance Protection program. Upscaling bridges and culverts must be in place too for towns to access resources from FEMA. FEMA funds fire

department grants for vehicles or equipment. **Engineering services are critical and we are under-resourced for this talent, even if there is funding to pay for it.**

- For example, one municipality has issued three RFPs with no responses. Engineers are tapped out and not able to respond to the RFPs. **Encourage anyone who distributes funds to lower the barrier to entry.** The more volunteer led work is, the more difficult it is to access funds.

### *Developing long-term resilience plans and protocols*

- **Promoting climate action plans in towns** (i.e. the one in Underhill) that they incorporate into their processes and policies would be valuable because it could provide a useful avenue for the state or Councils to support towns.
  - Heard that following the development of a town climate plan, it hasn't been referenced again, as many municipalities find it sufficient to refer to their Enhanced Energy Plans. Note that climate plans were of least interest based on a poll of Emergency Management Directors back in the Spring.
  - Finding a way to get a climate action plan to be continually referenced is a challenge, but they are far more comprehensive than an Enhanced Energy Plan because they consider adaptation and resilience rather than just carbon reductions. We should be thinking about how to get towns to see the whole picture regarding climate change; energy reductions are just one piece.
- Are we going to continue to have a **highly localized volunteer-driven protocol or a more coordinated protocol** between state, philanthropic organizations, nonprofits, etc?
- The RPCs sent a note to Congress about needing to have a discussion related to what long-term recovery policy and protocols should be for individuals and households. We are fortunate to have met some of FEMA's criteria in 2023-2024 major flood events, but this may not always be the case. **Should decide and include Emergency Management Directors in conversations** about whether there is an official role for them rather than just focusing on public infrastructure.
- **Need to prioritize local and state funds to invest in capital improvement** (and integrate hazard mitigation plans) with the most impacts.
- **Municipalities struggle with capital improvement planning**, often because they don't want to be held to the plan. Vermont will not be able to be as reliant on federal funds in the future.
- **The Climate Action Plan should be shortened** (i.e. *here's what Vermont's municipalities need*) and provide a set of instructions. This should have been done at the start.

## *Building out existing resources*

- **We should find ways to increase efficiency, specifically by taking advantage of existing systems** and making sure they are fully funded before instituting new ones.
- **Work closely with other state initiatives and make sure they are aligned.** For example, the floodplain restoration and flood mitigation that needs to happen should be aligned with the 30 by 30 initiative (*see Vermont's 2023 [Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act](#)*) and programs aimed at preserving or expanding agricultural lands. Need to make sure efforts are aligned because of limited funds.
- **Relying on volunteers is not resilient nor fair.** Community Resilience Organizations provide technical assistance to grassroots groups across the state (mostly in Central Vermont and the Kingdom). Approached by many after flooding in July to pull together a “People’s Demands for a Just Recovery from Flooding.” Part of what we are doing is advocating for short-term support that communities need as well as long-term change (i.e. housing, supporting long-term recovery groups and including them in emergency response, etc).
- It’s a helpful exercise to **have communities look at capacity for resilience not just in terms of disaster, but also in terms of broader social conditions.** Our organization is working on developing a more comprehensive resilience planning process. Already has a [Community Resilience Assessment](#) that was run in Johnson as part of the Vermont Council on Rural Development community visit process.
- It’s difficult to communicate with people who are spread out, and who don’t have the internet. **Need to advocate for third spaces and community meals – a social infrastructure that pulls people in** because relationships lead to information-sharing. This needs to be thought of as a component of climate resilience.
- **The Vermont Municipal Technical Assistance Program may need additional resources** to be more effective for municipalities.
- **Several participants shared resources and pilot efforts:**
  - Through the Recovery Office, there is work happening with FEMA with regional recovery networks. Southern Vermont will be the pilot for the state. Additionally, doing watershed planning and a convening on December 4th to discuss information-sharing, what is happening upstream/downstream, and flood resilience.
  - Along with the Southern Recovery Region, in Rutland, we are working on a collaborative effort called the Rutland Regional Disaster Cooperative (RRDC). We are trying to bring together municipalities, community based organizations, non profits, and businesses throughout the Rutland region to build capacity in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery.

### *Education and accessible engagement*

- **Community education and training is essential** (i.e. ongoing disaster preparedness education, informative workshops with accessible multilingual materials). Residents need to understand emergency procedures and need language access.
- **Communications about resources and education need to improve.** A lot of people aren't aware of events or resources available, especially migrant BIPOC communities.
- **We need to get creative about how we gather and share information.** Micro-sessions such as 15 minutes about *what to do during a wildfire* or *what can you do to help your town be more resilient* could be useful because 90-minute meetings like this or evening town halls are not great for families or people who work Monday through Friday.

### *Other suggestions related to disaster preparedness and response*

- **Adjusting buyouts standards**
  - FEMA buyouts from flooding come with restrictions on future development, which reduces the town's grand list. Towns are the ones who sign off on buyouts, but some are not granting them to residents impacted by flooding because they don't want the property removed from the grand list. Worth considering an option run by the state that has a stricter standard for when a buyout is allowed, for instance, allows for future development and also allows the landowner more say if they need a buyout.
- **Supporting Long Term Recovery Groups (LTRGs)**
  - Create a statewide Individual Assistance Recovery Policy, or more broadly a Recovery Policy that recognizes LTRGs as key local actors.
  - Fund LTRGs to support large scale and localized disaster recovery; cultivate, train, and maintain a local volunteer base; and manage local disaster recovery funds.
  - Mandate inclusion of LTRGs into Vermont Emergency Management's guidance for Local Emergency Management Plans (LEMPs) that are currently being revised across the state.
  - Streamline state reporting systems (e.g., 211 and CrisisCleanUp) into one platform that LTRGs can access to start outreach to damaged households.

### **Public Health:**

#### *Food security*



- **Ensure that food security is part of statewide funding and planning** related to climate resilience.
  - Make sure that people have access to nourishing food at all times.
  - The Vermont Food Bank is working on a [Food Security Roadmap](#), a 10-year roadmap to 2035, as part of the Farm to Plate initiative. There are lots of parallels with this climate action work, and we would love to see these supporting and amplifying each other's impact.
- When there is a flood that affects a farmer's property and crops for the season, those crops are no longer usable due to contamination of the flood waters. Extremely important that we **support farmers who experience events like this that can put them out of business.**
- **Composting** is supposed to be required and it is not enforced. If we started with Landlords proving that they are providing the receptacles to their tenants, that would be a step in the right direction.

### *Health emergencies*

- **Green Mountain Power developed creative relationships with Emergency Management Directors.** They have served as conduits into the towns (i.e. when they get calls about oxygen machines, they escalate the calls to local Emergency Management Directors who are able to directly help them).
  - Chittenden Reservoir Emergency Action Plan group is an [example](#) of a solid relationship between Green Mountain Power and towns in the floodpath.
- Used to have 2-day **oxygen tanks**; now they have machines that plug in with no backup capacity. Need to think about how rural customers experience these machines especially during disasters.
- **Consider rapidly deployable batteries as back up for medical devices.**

### **Participants**

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