

July 18, 2013

## **State steps up with flood disaster assistance**

by Dave Gram, AP

MONTPELIER — Vermont is repeating something that proved popular with towns after Tropical Storm Irene in 2011: getting state disaster relief out early to flood-damaged communities while they await federal aid.

Gov. Peter Shumlin and Treasurer Beth Pearce joined other officials Wednesday to announce that up to \$38 million could be made available from the state in towns declared eligible for disaster aid by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

“Once again, Vermont towns are responding to extraordinary weather events that have caused damage and destruction to roads, bridges and other infrastructure,” Shumlin said. “By placing key state payments on the fast-track, we hope to ease the burden on municipalities with any cash flow issues these storms created.”

The money comes from education aid and other state programs that help municipalities, and is to be repaid when towns get the FEMA aid they’re due.

“One lesson we learned from the past is that if we can get cash to cash-strapped towns as quickly as possible, we can make a big difference in their recoveries because the federal government tends to move like molasses,” Shumlin said.

He later added that the state is still negotiating with FEMA on how much money it will get to fix the state office complex in Waterbury, which was flooded by Tropical Storm Irene in August of 2011. The state’s plans for the site — some partially executed — include replacing the Vermont State Hospital with a smaller hospital in Berlin and satellite facilities around the state; demolishing and replacing some of the state offices at the Waterbury site and turning some of the property over to the town of Waterbury.

Wednesday’s announcement followed a fresh round of damage from high water caused by recent heavy rains in the state. May through June was the wettest two-month period on record in Vermont, according to the National Weather Service, and the first two weeks of July brought about twice their normal rainfall.

Roads and other infrastructure in Vermont have seen significant damage, while the tourism industry and farmers have had a tough summer season so far.

Also Wednesday, the state asked FEMA to do a preliminary damage assessment in Caledonia County to see if it is eligible for federal disaster assistance. The state already had requested FEMA assessments of damage in Washington, Chittenden, Orange, Orleans, Rutland, and Windsor counties; FEMA officials began touring areas affected by weather-related damage in those counties last week. State officials said storm damage in those towns could total more than \$4 million.

The state must show at least \$1 million in damage to be considered for a public assistance

disaster declaration. An individual county must show damage to roads, bridges, and other public property equaling or exceeding \$3.45 per capita.

Meanwhile, towns need to call in private contractors to help rebuild roads damaged by streams overflowing their banks and can't wait to have federal funding in hand before the work gets done, Pearce said.

"Receiving expedited funds from the state can be a big help by providing towns with the cash needed now and help reduce any costs that could be incurred if municipalities must borrow money to cover expenses," she said.

Steve Jeffrey, executive director of the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, agreed. Town cash flows tend to ebb in summer due to the property tax collection calendar, he said. "This early influx of state assistance will be greatly appreciated and will help tide the towns over until tax revenues and any FEMA assistance becomes available," he said.