

City of Keene
New Hampshire

MUNICIPAL SERVICES, FACILITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, August 25, 2021

5:30 PM

Council Chambers

Members Present:

Janis O. Manwaring, Chair
Randy L. Filiault, Vice Chair
Andrew M. Madison
Robert C. Williams

Staff Present:

Elizabeth A. Dragon, City Manager
Thomas P. Mullins, City Attorney
Kürt Blomquist, Public Works
Department/Emergency Management
Director
Rhett Lamb, Community Development
Department/ACM

Members Not Present:

Ward Three Council seat vacant

Chair Manwaring called the meeting to order at 5:30 PM.

1) John & Louis Hilow – Flooding at 36 Wetmore Street

Chair Manwaring welcomed Karen Hastings of 542 RT-10 in Gilsum, who is the daughter of and spoke on behalf of John and Louis Hilow of 36 Wetmore Street, who were also present. The City Council received a recent letter from the Hilows regarding re-occurring flooding at their residence. Ms. Hastings provided photos to the Committee. Ms. Hastings said the Hilows moved into their home in May 2013 and had their first flood during the summer 2014, when Ms. Hastings said former City employee Bill Byrne called Surry Mountain Dam because Wetmore Street was flooding and requested that they close the dam. The Hilow's basement flooded with four feet of water again in 2015 and 2017. During four floods, including the most recent in July 2017, the Hilows had to replace their furnace for \$900 each time because it was under water.

Ms. Hastings used photos to demonstrate the flooding conditions at 36 Wetmore Street, including this July 2021, when a canoe could be used in their yard. Ms. Hastings said a City employee told her parents that the water going into the yard and basement was a fluke; however, she said that the American Red Cross visited the property during the July 2021 flood and said it was true that the Army Corps of Engineers opens Surry Dam when there is a lot of water. Ms. Hastings cited another ongoing issue with water being piped from the adjacent Fairbanks Street through a temporary drainage system that also serves all the homes on Wetmore Street. She said that the temporary City solution is insufficient, it blocks a neighbor's driveway, and causes flooding with the littlest rain. She said the Public Works Department told her parents that they have been waiting on a piece of equipment for more than three months to fix that situation. Ms. Hastings said there is also an issue with the cleanliness of water at the Hilow's home, where they are unable to wash white laundry and they have water stains in their toilet, for example. She said the primary concern is the continual furnace replacement.

Her parents wanted to know if anything could be done by the Army Corps of Engineers at the Surry Mountain Dam or by the City to help rectify the flooding on Wetmore Street. Mr. Hilow addressed the Committee, stating that this had been a constant headache for her parents. He and his wife are 90 and 87 years-old and they want to stay in their home, but the continued flooding is an issue. He said he calls Surry Dam, and they say the gate is closed.

The Director of Public Works/Emergency Management Director, Kürt Blomquist, addressed this concern by also sharing some photos. In particular, he showed an aerial image of the Wetmore Street area, which demonstrated that the street is within the 100-year floodplain, meaning that any time the Ashuelot River and Ash Swamp Brook fill with water, the area of Wetmore Street backfills with water. Even roadways and properties as far as Key Road are impacted due to a north-south flowing drainage system flowing from the Ash Swamp Brook are to the Ashuelot River eventually. The Director of Public Works said he has been aware of issues in this area since 2005, including the recent storms of July 17-19, 2021.

Next, the Director of Public Works discussed the Army Corps of Engineers, stating that the City has a long-time relationship with them. The Corps constructed Surry Mountain Dam in the mid-1950s for flood control in the Connecticut River Valley. Therefore, the Dam controls water on the various tributaries of the Connecticut River to manage flooding events. Another dam, Otter Brook, was constructed to control discharges into the Minnewawa and Branch Rivers. The Army Corps of Engineers operates these facilities with local staff in the area, but actual control orders come from the Corps headquarters in Waltham, MA/Concord MA. The Director of Public Works said the local Corps staff do their best to minimize impacts to the City, but ultimately, the Corps headquarters can preempt Keene's immediate needs in favor of minimizing overall impacts to the Connecticut River. The Corps has permits to discharge water from the dam that specify certain quantities of water that must be discharged continuously as required by the Environmental Protection Agency to maintain aqua life in the Ashuelot River. Therefore, the Surry Dam is never truly closed, but discharge levels may increase or decrease. The Public Works Department begins communicating with the Corps in advance of every storm event because it typically takes 8—10 hours for them to begin shutting gates at Surry Dam to achieve their lowest discharge level. In the case of the July 2021 storm, the Corps began closing gates at Surry Dam on July 16. Records for how these facilities are operating are available to the public on the Corps' website. There are also local river elevation stage gauges at Martell Court and one in Swanzey, which alert if the river approaches warning stages. The Director of Public Works and Fire Chief monitor these levels regularly.

Uniquely during this July 2021 storm event, the Swanzey river gauge reached warning levels before Martell Court, and it is typically the opposite. The reason for this difference is unknown. Throughout this 2021 storm, the Corps maintained essentially a minimum discharge from Surry Dam. The Director of Public Works recalled that before this storm, the City had received 12 inches of rain since November 2020. The July storm event brought the total close to 19 inches, leaving soils saturated and water with nowhere to go, particularly in areas of Wetmore Street, which is one of the lowest elevations in Keene. Keene is in a valley and therefore it takes longer for backwater overflowing streambanks to flow downstream and out of surrounding

neighborhoods. Often, small ditches like Ash Swamp Brook fill with leaves and debris over time and water must find another route.

Most homes around Wetmore Street were built in the 1940s and 1950s and many are built higher-up with slopes down to the driveways, allowing water to flow around the homes during smaller storm events. The Director of Public Works mentioned that during the July 2021 storm event, the Fire Department pumped water out of 80 local basements. However, he cautioned that the Department cannot do that for all basements, but only those with clean water not contaminated with things like paints or oils.

The Director of Public Works stated that at present, not much can be done to stop such river backwater flooding on Wetmore Street. However, he said there are some programs available to property owners, including:

- National Flood Insurance Program – sometimes required by mortgage companies for properties in the 100-year floodplain; does cover loss to possessions, which is not typical for normal home flood insurance.
- Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) Hazard Mitigation Grant program – money for elevation or removal of buildings, usually requires demonstration of loss and impact to a structure. Based on structural damage not possessions. Mr. Blomquist noted the City has had a past experience with this program and a property on Church Street.

The Director of Public Works continued stating that sometimes during a Disaster Declaration funding is available to both businesses and individuals up to approximately \$23,000. The brief from the state's Homeland Security for the July 2021 storm indicates that there would be Disaster Declaration for public properties, but it was unclear and unlikely that Keene would reach the threshold for private properties.

The Director of Public Works continued that he also wished to address the temporary water issue on Wetmore Street that Ms. Hastings mentioned. He stated that there was a water main failure on Winchester Street and at the last City Council meeting, the Council approved funding for those engineering repairs. The Engineering Division is working to find a contractor and the hope is for the work to be complete next month, which would remove Wetmore Street from the temporary water line. If there are issues with the temporary water line on Wetmore Street, residents should call the Public Works Department.

Councilor Filiault said the insurance options were interesting but asked, in laymen's terms, whether anything could be done to stop the flooding of this property, by the City or Corps of Engineers. He said that the 100-year floodplain feels more like an "every year floodplain." The Director of Public Works said there was nothing the Corps could do, and the City was pursuing several directions. For example, the day following this meeting, the Director of Public Works had a meeting scheduled with the Corps to discuss a planning grant to handle flooding on Beaver Brook. He added that since this July event, Staff have been looking at the City's Floodplain Ordinances, because a challenge is climatic, with more intense high frequency storm events. He said that the Council is familiar with much of Keene's aging water infrastructure being undersized for these large storm events and the City has been working toward correcting certain areas. The Director of Public Works reiterated that unfortunately this particular area is at the

bottom of the City valley, where all the water goes and it cannot move out quickly. He suggested that individual property owners could elevate items in their basements, like furnaces, if there is overhead space. He suggested window sealants or glass blocks for when water reaches that high. He said that unfortunately this year, there was water everywhere and the soils were too saturated. He added that the area of Wetmore Street has high groundwater already. He said of course flood insurance can help provide resources for some losses. Still, there are unfortunately not many immediate actions the City can take right now.

Mr. Hilow spoke inaudibly away from a microphone. The Director of Public Works summarized what Mr. Hilow said: essentially that beaches are flooded at both Surry Mountain and Otter Brook Dams. The Director of Public Works said that the Corps of Engineers/Federal Government has ultimate control of the dam. The Corps issued a press release stating that those beaches are closed for the rest of the season and reminding the public that recreation is allowed in these areas, but the primary purpose of the areas is to maintain and control water, which sometimes causes them to flood.

Councilor Madison referred to the area west and south of the Hilow's residence, between their home and Ash Swamp Brook, and asked if it is predominantly forest or also wetland. The Director of Public Works said it is mostly wetland with some scattered upland areas, which is why it is undeveloped. Councilor Madison asked whether there are beaver issues in Ash Swamp Brook. The Director of Public Works said there are public reports, but the NH Wetlands Bureau places certain restrictions on how to respond. If people notice beaver dams or activity, they are encouraged to alert the Public Works Department. On occasion, the Public Works Department does relocate beavers and address their dams, which sometimes upsets the public, but he ensured that it is done properly.

Councilor Williams noted that there are many parking lots and roofs in the area surrounding Wetmore Street that likely have a lot of run off. He referred to further up the watershed, where Monadnock Marketplace was built many years ago atop swamplands, which he said could be potentially holding back some of this water. He asked whether any information is available from projects like parking lots or the Monadnock Marketplace on the performance of their drainage systems to ensure they are functioning, or if the City needed to investigate it. The Director of Public Works said, to his knowledge, then the Monadnock Marketplace was constructed in 2013, they relocated an extensive amount of the City's old tax ditch systems. He said they do annual inspections that are reported to the Public Works Department and to his knowledge they were following the City's developmental rules. He would have to work with the Community Development Department to determine when other sites were developed and what rules were in place at the time regarding stormwater runoff. Primary regulations through the planning process are that a development cannot change the velocity of which water runs off a site from pre-construction conditions. To his knowledge, all sites followed the conditions of their original site plans. Councilor Williams was interested to know whether some evaluation process was possible to determine whether drainage at such developments could use improvements.

Councilor Williams also wanted to know about the agreement from the RT-10 construction project, which added a certain amount of fill to the floodplain to elevate the highway. NH DOT agreed to abide by Keene's restrictions and dig somewhere else in the floodplain to compensate

for that lost flood storage. He thought there had been progress choosing a location for the dig, but asked the status. The Director of Public Works discussed the documented history of that 2000 bypass project, during which the State had funding issues and made interim improvements to the T-intersection with additional lanes. During the Winchester Street project in 2008, the State agreed to comply with the City's Floodplain Ordinance, which states that every amount of fill added in the floodplain must be compensated elsewhere. The Community Development Director, Rhett Lamb, confirmed and provided an update. He confirmed an area for the fill compensation was chosen between the T-intersection and Winchester Street in the proximity of the Best Western. The project is approaching the final design phase, but they will have to go through permitting processes for wetlands impacts to move forward, so construction would likely be one year away.

Chair Manwaring felt badly that the City could not do more to help the Hilow's flooding problem and ensured them that she would personally provide them the minutes of this meeting.

Vice Chair Filiault made the following motion, which Councilor Williams seconded. On a vote of 4-0, the Municipal Services, Facilities, & Infrastructure Committee accepted the communication as informational.

2) **Renaming of the North Bridge – Recommendations from the Bicycle & Pedestrian Path Advisory Committee**

The Community Development Director, Rhett Lamb, summarized the recommendations from the Bicycle & Pedestrian Path Advisory Committee's July meeting on this matter. He said there was lengthy discussion, for which the minutes were available. The discussion included past efforts to rename the North Bridge, recognizing the pitfalls of the naming process because a variety of people present different preferences. Hence, the BPPAC did recommend keeping the North Bridge name for the foreseeable future and instead suggesting to naming a section of the Cheshire Rail Trail after former Mayor Pregent.

Councilor Williams clarified that the BPPAC suggested naming a one-mile portion around the North Bridge after Mayor Pregent. Chair Manwaring confirmed stating the idea was from Island Street to Pitcher Street. Councilor Williams thanked the BPPAC for considering this, but stated that he did not sense excitement from the Pregent family about naming a section of the Trail instead, and mentioned concern for naming many sections of trails after many different people. He suggested returning to the drawing board on the idea. Councilor Williams also wanted to revisit the two other bridges planned for installation in the City, one with the designer's name and the bailey bridge that currently goes over Island Street that has no name attached, which is to be reconstructed over Swanzey Factory Road. He said the bailey bridge is an antique bridge and would be perhaps appropriate to name for Mayor Pregent because he was an antiques dealer; he suggested considering that option.

Councilor Filiault said he had no problem looking at anything, but he addressed the controversy that arises in trying to name a bridge after a person because it usually causes other people to bring forward many other preferred names, which is why the North Bridge name was chosen. He suggested a motion to accept this as informational or for more time so that honoring Mayor

Pregent could be rethought. He warned again that naming a bridge after a person has been historically controversial in Keene.

Chair Manwaring welcomed public comment and recognized Chuck Redfern of 9 Colby Street, who is a member of BPPAC. He mentioned that it was a good discussion even if everything was not drawn out in the minutes. However, he said he was speaking before this Committee to correct an impression he might have given at the BPPAC meeting that was not accurately reflected in the minutes, which indicated Mr. Redfern saying that the City Engineer did not want the North Bridge named after Mayor Pregent. Mr. Redfern stated that what he said at the meeting might have sounded that way but clarified his consideration when making those remarks: that there was conversation of naming the Prowse Bridge after Mayor Pregent that was discouraged because it is named as such by State Law. The State likes the historical significance of the name, and historical grants could be potentially impacted by changing the name. Mr. Redfern stated that he wanted to clarify that no City Staff member indicated any preference and he regretted if it seemed otherwise. Mr. Redfern continued discussing the history of the North Bridge's naming in honor of the Cheshire Rail Trail continuing north after the bridge, which does actually go west. He thanked Mayor Pregent for his many years of service and agreed that he should be recognized in some way, including perhaps a plaque along the trail describing that service.

There were no further public comments.

Committee discussion ensued on whether to accept this report on behalf of the BPPAC as informational or place it on more time, given that the family was not pleased with naming a section of the trail in the former Mayor's honor. Chair Manwaring did like the idea of a plaque for the section of Rail Trail from Island Street to Pitcher Street, as Mr. Redfern mentioned, because it could be accomplished quickly, whereas naming the bailey bridge would be years out. The Chair added that many people use the Cheshire Rail Trail during the summer and the plaque would be seen. Councilor Madison agreed that he was one person using the Trail a lot this summer and he thought it would be great to find a way to honor Mayor Pregent, but since his family did not like the idea he suggested accepting the report as informational. Councilor Williams' preference was to keep the bailey bridge possibility open, to not lose momentum on this issue, and so he requested more time.

The City Manager, Elizabeth Dragon, questioned what task the Committee wanted to accomplish with more time if that were the choice, stating that she would need more direction. She added that the process of naming a different bridge would require a new communication to the Council. Councilor Williams wanted more time for public input to narrow down a name for the bailey bridge. The City Attorney understood the sentiment, but said the issue is publicly notice for the bailey bridge discussion when the initiative with the North Bridge was already started. So, the City Attorney recommended, if changing the focus of discussion, then the new matter should be presented separately to City Council. He said placing this on more time for this purpose would not be a clean process and therefore urged accepting this recommendation from BPPAC as informational and Councilor Williams could bring his new idea forward to the Council. Councilor Filiault agreed that accepting as informational was a way to start fresh with the idea.

Councilor Filiault made the following motion, which Councilor Madison seconded.

Chair Manwaring stated that she was a little uncomfortable. Councilor Williams said he would bring his bailey bridge idea forward soon. Chair Manwaring agreed this was just about the BPPAC report.

On a vote of 4-0, the Municipal Services, Facilities & Infrastructure Committee accepted the recommendation from the Bicycle Pedestrian Path Advisory Committee on the renaming of the North Bridge as informational.

There being no further business, Chair Manwaring adjourned the meeting at 6:34 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katrnya Kibler, Minute Taker
August 26, 2021

Edits submitted by,
Patricia Little, City Clerk