The (Not So) Perfect Storm – Notes from the Select Board

The “Elliot Storm” of December 23, 2022 devastated numerous town roads. Plugged undersized culverts, along with excessive amounts of rain and melted snow, caused severe road washouts. Damages caused by the storm forced the Select Board and Road Commissioner to reconsider our approach to addressing construction and maintenance of town roads. Lessons learned and corrective action steps presented below are necessary to keep property taxes from spiraling out of control. Increased effort on culvert work, tree and ledge removal, crowning, and paving using grants is required.

Five inches of rain within 24 hours, on 12-18” of snow, resulted in unprecedented flooding, tree and brush debris that rapidly clogged culverts, and severe washouts of many town roads. Culverts which are capable of handling more “normal” rain amounts were overwhelmed. Roads on or adjacent to hills were the most severely impacted, some with 6- 8 foot ditches running down the middle of the road. Most severely damaged were the Hogback Mountain, Haystack Mountain, Pierce Hill, Halldale, Goosepecker, and Morrill Roads.

Your Town officials did a tremendous job responding to this disaster, in particular Road Commissioner Richard Peavey, the Montville Volunteer Fire and Rescue Dept, Emergency Management staff, as well as many residents and contractors who worked long hours.

Montville had the highest monetary damage in Waldo County due to this storm. Total “Elliot” damage may total $150,000 to $200,000, as not all work is completed due to winter and mud season conditions. The Town has applied to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for funds that would help to mitigate the cost for road repairs and emergency services incurred during the storm. The “Elliot Storm” is the second major storm to impact the Town since 2021, when the “Halloween Storm” caused significant but less severe damage. Montville applied to FEMA at that time and will be reimbursed $60,000 for the Halloween Storm in 2023. Hannah Hatfield has been instrumental in managing the FEMA grants, which have been very time consuming.

As the effects of climate change become more apparent in our region, the frequency and severity of these storms causing significant road damage will likely continue to be apparent. The financial impact of these types of reoccurring storms is not sustainable. The Select Board and the Road Commissioner will begin to identify the factors that have adversely affected our roads in a physical and fiscal sense and develop strategic solutions to address and mitigate these storm related problems.

Clogged culverts and heavy rain were the immediate cause of major washouts. The underlying cause is we have not been budgeting for a more aggressive ditching and culvert cleaning. Replacement of existing culverts with larger culverts will occur as required. Larger culverts cost more but not as much as a severe washout. An example is the Hogback Mountain Road with approximately $20,000 in damages due to one debris plugged small culvert. The resulting washout was an 8-foot-deep ditch in the middle of the road. Haystack Mountain Road suffered similar but not as severe damages. We plan on a routine ditching program on a three-year cycle.

Another area for improvement is the removal of tree canopies and roadside brush that shade roads preventing them from drying out, resulting in our notorious Montville mud season. The Choate Road tree canopy was cut back last summer, resulting in a much drier road with ice and snow melting more rapidly due to increased sunlight. The clearing of trees and brush within the Town Right of Way is necessary and will result in better road conditions and to some degree, mitigate mud season. This process will be ongoing for several years and budget adjustments will reflect this priority.

The presence of ledge diverting water flow has caused deep washouts. The 2023 proposed budget addresses this problem and we plan on removing ledge where it has repeatedly caused damage during these storms. Hidden Valley, North Ridge, Haystack Mountain, and Howes Roads are examples where this occurs.

Crowning of the roads to enhance drainage is necessary and good practice. Use of non-conventional road surface material such as glass and possibly other materials may offer alternatives in the future. The Board is examining opportunities in this area. Paving may be a longer-term solution for some of our roads but this will need to be studied to determine its viability.

The Public Works and Fire Dept 2023 budgets are impacted by significant  price increases in material, equipment, and labor costs. For example, the price of road salt doubled this past year. Diesel prices have also increased dramatically impacting our summer road maintenance, plowing, and Fire Dept costs. We have three options to address future expenditures: raise taxes, borrow money resulting in higher taxes, or find alternative sources of money. The Select Board and the Budget Committee are focusing on private, state, and federal grant opportunities as the best choice to supplement our budget and maintain fiscal responsibility.

An example of using the grant approach that can save the Town significant costs is the replacement of the culverts due to collapse on Bean Road and Penney Road. Both, perhaps cross streams with potential Atlantic Salmon habitats, creating a myriad of permitting requirements. The Select Board has contacted the appropriate agencies to start work through this process. This could be potentially a costly repair but there are grant programs through the Maine DEP and the Nature Conservancy that may pay up to 100% of the project cost.

Grant applications have proven effective in Montville; solar panels on the Town Salt shed were paid for by a grant, the Fire Dept has successfully been awarded a significant number of grants that have brought sizable savings for the purchase of a fire truck, air bottles, radios, and other equipment. Karen York has led this tremendous effort. The Select Board and resident, Fran Gonzales, successfully applied for a $40,000 DEP Waste Management grant to replace the box truck used for transporting recyclables to Unity Area Recycling Center.

It is important to note that many of the sizable Federal and State grant opportunities available can only be applied for if specific, required, and approved “plans” are in place. The Board has submitted a grant for $50,000 that will help support writing a Hazard Mitigation Plan. Once approved, this will allow the Town to apply for grants, such as road mitigation and emergency services. The Board is also considering preparing a Climate Resiliency Plan that will open up possibilities for climate impact and alternative energy related grants.

The Budget Committee and Select Board are in the process of exploring grants for projects such as, road and bridge repair, road work to mitigate future damage, building insulation and efficiency, Fire Department vehicle replacement and equipment needs, adding solar panels on Town buildings, adding a fire station and emergency operations center/community building, IT computer hardware and software upgrades and more. Public feedback and discussion on these topics and their priorities are essential in the grant process.

Grant opportunities abound and the process of identification, application, execution, and required follow-up can be enormously time consuming as is the case with FEMA storm grants. The complexity of grants varies tremendously from simple to significant. Discussion with consultants with relevant grant expertise is in progress. Additionally, the Administrative Assistant’s job may include more grant responsibilities in the future. The 2023 budget reflects costs to provide for grant writing, technical assistance, management and required matching funds expected for some grant awards.

To summarize, the Town cannot afford to conduct business as we have for decades. Road budgeting and practice will focus on culverts, better ditching, tree clearing, ledge removal, and paving. We are looking forward to the future and implementing a long term and sustainable approach to better serve our residents and minimize the impact on property taxes. Exploring and utilizing grant opportunities in a variety of Town departments is an ideal and viable alternative for strategic and budgetary planning.

Respectfully submitted,

The Select Board