



Town of Richmond, Rhode Island

Building / Planning / Zoning Department
 5 Richmond Townhouse Road, Wyoming, RI 02898
 www.richmondri.com

To: The Honorable Richmond Town Council
 From: Talia Jalette, MPA, Town Planner
 Date: 1/31/2024
 RE: Requested Update on Valley Lodge Flood Mitigation

The Request:

On January 10, 2024, I was informed that the following item had been added to the Town Council's January 16, 2024 Agenda: "Report and discussion, request for update from town planner regarding Valley Lodge flood mitigation." In discussion with Town Clerk Erin Liese and Town Administrator Karen Pinch, I noted that, while I would be willing to write a report, I would need to know what specific information the Council would like the report to contain. My initial assumption was that the Council may want updates on the PL-566 Program, of which the Town is a co-sponsor. **As such, this update will relate largely to my recent communications with Darrell Moore, the Town's local point of contact at the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).** They are the body responsible for administering the PL-566 Program, in conjunction with the sponsoring Towns. I will also provide information about another program offered by the NRCS – the Emergency Watershed Protection Program.

The PL-566 Project:

The project that Richmond has co-sponsored has been formally identified as the "Wood Pawcatuck Rivers Watershed Flood Protection Project." The eleven "primary goals and expected outcomes of the watershed management plan [are to]:

- Protect and enhance the resiliency of the watershed communities to future flood damages.
- Maintain and improve the viability of agricultural and forested land.
- Strengthen and restore natural ecosystems, water quality, species and habitat, while increasing flood resiliency.
- Help watershed communities (local and state governments and private land owners) prepare for and mitigate the impacts of future severe storms.
- Protect critical community infrastructure and the ability of communities to deliver vital municipal services.
- Protect and enhance fish and wildlife species and habitats.
- Help communities understand watershed and riverine processes so that better land use and infrastructure investments can be made.

- Strengthen local land use policies and regulations to enhance flood resilience.
- Improve the quality of life, recreational opportunities, and economic viability of watershed communities.
- Facilitate capacity-building and engage watershed municipalities and other stakeholder groups in the watershed planning process and future plan implementation.
- Promote collaboration across municipal boundaries, bringing watershed communities and groups together to cooperate around shared issues of concern and objectives without compromising their “home rule” principles.”¹

The NRCS has recognized that the subject watershed “has historically been challenged with riverine and drainage-related flooding in developed areas.”² The extreme flooding Richmond and many surrounding communities experienced in 2010 was the result of “the incredible amount of precipitation (over 16”) that fell in February and March 2010, along with saturated soils, high water tables, lack of leaf cover and limited pervious surfaces”³. In the face of recent, extensive flooding, I reached out to Mr. Moore on January 16, 2024, to understand the status of the project. I have attached my correspondence with him to this memo.

I noted that, when I had attended the January 26, 2023 Public Scoping Meeting, my understanding had been that a draft plan or environmental assessment would be prepared for early Spring 2024. Further, I noted that my understanding had been that, from start to finish, the entire process should take about 6 years to implement (2 years for planning, 2 years for design, and 2 years for construction). I asked Mr. Moore if the sponsor communities could still expect the draft for early Spring 2024, and whether the timeline was still accurate. I noted that there are many Richmond residents who are banking on the success of this program in alleviating extreme flooding in the Watershed – particularly in the face of recent, compounding storm events.

Mr. Moore explained that:

- 1) As more communities had signed on as sponsors, the roll-out of the plan had been delayed. Now, the NRCS hopes to have the plan wrapped up for late Summer 2024.
- 2) Due to the size of the watershed, the design and implementation stages will take longer to complete.
- 3) The NRCS was “still pushing to keep the project expedited and not allow it to drag out.”
- 4) There are other programs that may offer “faster relief”, such as the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program. He offered to schedule a meeting to discuss the program, which I accepted.

EWP Program:

I met with Pooh Vongkhamdy, Michael Viola, Michael Wilkinson, and Mr. Moore to learn more about the EWP Program on January 24, 2024. Each of the aforementioned parties are employed

¹ United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service – Rhode Island. (n.d.). *Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Planning Project – Rhode Island*. <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/conservation-basics/conservation-by-state/rhode-island/wood-pawcatuck-watershed-planning-project>

² See 1.

³ See 1.

by the NRCS. The meeting was very informative. For example, the EWP does not require a Federal or State disaster declaration – the NRCS State Conservationist can declare a “local watershed emergency” to start the process.

Essentially, the EWP program authorizes the NRCS to purchase permanent easements to restore floodplains. This, typically, though not always, translates to purchasing private property, at fair market value, for the purposes of demolition. The underpinning investigative work, which would determine how to improve the functions of the floodplain, would be conducted by the NRCS. Participation is entirely voluntary – the NRCS could find that, for example, 20 homes in an area may be eligible for purchase by the NRCS through this program, but only 5 of those property owners may be willing to sell their homes for these purposes.

There are some complicating factors – for example, this program does not provide funding to assist property owners with finding new properties within the vicinity (sometimes, the fair market value for a home may not be enough to purchase another home in Town). While a house can be picked up and moved, the program does not assist in identifying appropriate locations for the homes to be moved to. As such, participation may be limited. While it is certainly an option that the Town could avail itself of, it is not a solution that will be palatable to everyone. Further, it seems somewhat insensitive to suggest this as a viable option to people who may just need a few sandbags or a sump pump.

For the Future:

I would welcome:

- The opportunity to address specific questions that the Council may present or pose on February 6, 2024 (in a future memo or at a future presentation to the Council),
- The opportunity to answer additional questions about the PL-566 program or the EWP Program that the Council may present or pose on February 6, 2024 (in a future memo or at a future presentation to the Council),
- The opportunity to apply for funding or assistance to address pervasive stormwater or flooding problems from other relevant sources on behalf of the Town, with the Council’s express direction.