

INFORMATION ABOUT THE RECENT RAINSTORM

On Friday March 19th, the Police Chief, Fire Chief, DPW Director, Police Department Traffic Safety Officer and Town Administrator participated in a conference call with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) and the State Executive Office of Public Safety to obtain information about assistance programs available to residents and local government for damages and expenses incurred in the storm of March 12 through 16.

This storm brought rain levels not seen in this region in decades and caused widespread damage here in Natick, throughout eastern Massachusetts and beyond.

MEMA is currently assessing damage and the associated costs to see if the storm meets minimum thresholds to apply for federal disaster assistance. Two separate but parallel assessments are underway. The Individual Assistance program applies to private property owners (homes and businesses) while the Public Assistance program is for public property (municipal buildings and infrastructure – such as roads, drainage systems and bridges – as well as the overtime costs incurred by the town in response to the storm).

Information for Private Property Owners

MEMA is focusing its initial efforts on the Individual Assistance Program for private property owners; they are in the process right now of gathering information necessary to apply for a federal Individual Assistance Disaster declaration. Such a declaration would make federal funds available to home and business owners who suffered property damage in the March 12-16 storm. (Note that such assistance would apply to this storm only). Preliminary Damage Assessment (PDA) Teams began their work in the region last week; some Natick residents may receive a team visit. Please be sure to ask for proper identification from anyone representing themselves as a PDA team member. The PDA Team will likely be traveling in marked vehicles and may be accompanied by local police officers or firefighters.

MEMA's initial focus is on properties that received significant uninsured damage. Significant damage includes sewerage damage, flooding in living areas, loss of essential components of the home (such as heating systems, refrigerators, etc.), structural damage, or conditions that make the home uninhabitable. Property owners do not have to receive a visit from the PDA team to be eligible for federal assistance, should such assistance become available.

If an Individual Assistance Disaster is declared, property owners will be given the opportunity to apply for assistance. MEMA personnel will be available to assist individuals with the application process. Available assistance may include cash reimbursements, temporary housing, repairs, low interest loans, crisis counseling and unemployment payments if your employer was closed due to storm damage.

Sometime late in the week of March 22 – 26 MEMA expects to have an idea of which counties will be eligible to apply for federal assistance (disaster declarations are made on

a county-by-county basis). A formal request will then be made by the Governor to the President. While there is no required timetable for the President's action, FEMA assured us that everyone is determined to expedite action.

Property owners should document damage as best as possible. Photographs of the damage are recommended and certainly all receipts for expenses incurred due to the storm should be saved – just as you would for a potential insurance claim. Property owners are encouraged to contact their insurer to determine if any of their damage is covered.

Property owners are urged to dry out all areas as promptly as possible to reduce the opportunity for mold to develop. Carpets, furniture and sheetrock or drywall in particular are susceptible to mold. If the services of a contractor are needed, please be sure to check references carefully.

We know that many property owners have been endured tremendous inconvenience and frustration due to the weather events of the past week. We are working with the state and federal government to enhance the probability that federal disaster assistance will be available to help mitigate the costs that you incurred. Thank you for your patience.

In the meantime, residents have informational resources available: The state's 211 line includes information about the storm; just dial 211 any time, any day. Property owners may also find the FEMA website (www.fema.gov) and the MEMA website (www.mass.gov/mema) informative. In addition, we will update this link as soon as we hear more from MEMA as to opportunities for seeking federal disaster assistance.

The Town's Storm Response

While many private and public properties were damaged in this storm, it could have been worse if not for the prompt and extensive response by town departments. We were up against many significant and urgent challenges. First, obviously, the sheer volume of rainwater was unprecedented in recent decades. Groundwater and river levels were extremely high, causing significant flooding. And the MWRA sewer system – into which all Natick sewer is pumped – was at capacity; the pipes were so full that our sewerage could not enter and instead backed up into many peoples' homes.

DPW workers – primarily those from the Water and Sewer Division – worked for over 40 hours straight during the height of the storm in an effort to keep the sewer system working as best as possible, as well as pumping water and sewerage from properties throughout the town. Firefighters, too, pumped water and sewerage from over 300 homes around the clock. The Police Department was working at capacity directing traffic around several road closures including on major routes such as Speen Street, Mill Street and Route 135 and responding to emergencies throughout the town. The Police Department's efforts were aided by the Auxiliary Police, all of whom serve the community on a volunteer basis. Representatives from the Board of Health conducted numerous inspections to ensure properties were habitable during and after the storm. All the while, the Public Safety Dispatchers proficiently fielded hundreds of calls that

inevitably result from an emergency of this magnitude and duration. Many, many thanks to these town employees. Their hard work and the cooperation across departments allowed them to assist hundreds of residents and minimize damage throughout the town.

Thanks also to the businesses that provided assistance during this extensive emergency, including Roche Brothers, which provided sandwiches and more for those working long hours and the Natick Collection, which provided exterior lighting units that were of critical need during nighttime activities.

We did learn about some opportunities to improve our emergency response system. Notably, the Town does not have a so-called “Reverse 911” system. This system is a tool used by public safety and other departments to communicate with the community – or designated portions thereof – in the event of an emergency or other need to quickly disseminate important information. Ironically, we had recently begun to evaluate the cost and effectiveness of a particular Reverse 911 system and will continue to look into this opportunity. We are grateful to the School Department, however, for disseminating information through their communication system to parents. It was critical to reach as many residents as possible to deter residents from flushing into the sewer system and prevent worsening of the sewer backups occurring throughout town.

Opportunities for Reimbursement to the Town

The Town also incurred significant expenses associated with the storm. Public buildings, drainage systems, roadways and bridges were damaged. As noted, significant overtime was incurred in the Police Department, Department of Public Works and Fire Departments as they responded to emergencies throughout the community over the course of several days.

Damage to public property was extensive. The Eliot Montessori School – a town-owned building – experienced significant flooding on the lower classroom level. Many manholes and catch basins, particularly in South Natick neighborhoods, were damaged and will require repairs. The most extensive damage to public property, however, occurred on Speen Street in the section south of Route 135 near the Roche Bros. entrance. Structural damage to the culvert in this area will result in long-term restrictions. Until this section of roadway is reconstructed, the southbound lane will remain closed to all traffic; the northbound lane will be open to passenger and other vehicles other than heavy commercial vehicles. This inconvenience is expected to last several weeks – if not months – unless federal funds are made available.

We are compiling a summary of all costs incurred during the storm, and the cost of repairing damage caused by the storm and will submit this data to MEMA. Similar to the Individual Assistance Disaster declaration process, MEMA will be determining if thresholds are met to warrant seeking a Public Assistance Disaster declaration for Middlesex County from the federal government. If such a declaration is made, the Town would be eligible for reimbursement of up to 75% of eligible costs incurred as a result of the storm.

This significant storm was a real test of patience, manpower and resources for residents and town government alike. For many of us, it will take some time to recover fully. We will continue to provide information to facilitate residents' access to state and federal resources as soon as it becomes available.