

July 13, 2021

Fellow Whitman County Mayors:

As a Whitman County mayor, I am reaching out to my peers across the county to share some of the things we have learned in the aftermath of the Babb Road fire (and steps the town's government should have taken prior to this disastrous event). I also cannot stress enough the importance of providing immediate and on-going mental healthcare for residents and members of town government after a catastrophic event. If even one of the items listed in the attached document helps another community avoid some of the difficulties we have encountered in the last year, my time spent writing them down will have been well worth it.

I also want to encourage you to take one more step toward ensuring the safety of your town, especially given the current situation (drought conditions, record-breaking heatwaves, early onset of fire season, frequent wind storms, and not enough trained firefighting personnel in most areas). Ask the landowners at the edge of your town limits to consider plowing a wide fire break around the community *now*, and commit to keeping it clear of vegetation from June through September. The Babb Road fire moved with such speed from the time it started until it roared through Malden and Pine City, there was no time to effectively do anything defend the towns. This may spare you and your townspeople the terror experienced by the residents of Malden and Pine City on September 7, 2020, and the physical, mental, emotional, and financial struggles they have repeatedly endured on a weekly, if not daily basis, since.

As we approach the one year anniversary of the destruction of Malden and Pine City, it is my hope that by sharing some of our lessons learned, we can in some way help other communities.

Respectfully,



Dan Harwood, Mayor
Town of Malden

Rural Town Government Disaster Preparedness

TO DO NOW...BEFORE the Disaster

1. Figure out in advance how to quickly warn residents of a town-wide emergency without using your public warning system, as a power outage may render it useless.
2. Make certain all town records, ordinances, policies, etc. are backed up safely off-site and quickly accessible if you cannot enter your town offices or if they have been destroyed.
3. Collect, in advance, current contact information for residents - phone number and/or email so the town can reach people even if they are not currently living in town if their dwelling was destroyed. Develop a way to have residents update this information annually.
4. Designate an area of your website for emergency communications with residents so when the need arises, they know in advance where to go for information, and then post information there on a regular basis.
5. Make sure town water and septic systems are secure, and develop city codes to make sure residential well caps (if applicable) are required and up to code to prevent contamination.
6. Build/modify municipal structures with an eye toward fire resilience and ease of defense for firefighters, and develop or modify city codes to do the same for residential and commercial buildings.

TO DO AFTER the Disaster

1. Set up multiple ways to communicate with residents to accommodate anyone with a disability or poor/no internet or computer access.
2. Set up a system to quickly and efficiently have residents complete and return right of entry forms for property clean up. When residents scatter, not having signed forms will stall your clean-up, and therefore your rebuilding efforts, for possibly the entire town, or prevent people from receiving government-provided debris cleaning and removal services at no cost.
3. There are different kinds of FEMA disaster declarations – Individual Assistance and Public Assistance. Know what each one means as far as what kind of aid the town and its residents are eligible to receive and especially note the differences.
4. Be careful about disturbing too much soil during clean-up and know what kind of building activity is restricted by NEPA and SEPA evaluations as these will need to be done in order to receive certain grant funding from the state or federal governments for rebuilding infrastructure and municipal facilities.
5. Starting the day after the disaster, make mental health care a priority – not only for your residents but for yourself, your staff, and council members as you will have many difficult, emotionally draining days ahead. Identify and train Disaster Case Managers and triage your residents to get DCMs to those most in need first, but ultimately work toward assigning a DCM to everyone. Make public opportunities for residents to share their stories of what they experienced on the day of the disaster, and how they are coping since, with their neighbors so everyone is heard, receives validation, and has an idea of what other people in the community are going through. I cannot stress enough how important this will be as you work to move forward with recovery and rebuilding efforts. Residents need to start healing emotionally and mentally before they can truly work with each other, the town government, and state and federal agencies in a positive way. Plan for mental health services for 2-3 years after the disaster.