

Public works mutual aid plan open to communities

By SHERI QUALTERS
Union Leader Correspondent

BOW — Public works director Leighton "Chum" Cleverly has spent years getting the ball rolling on a statewide public works mutual aid program, but unlike most pioneers he hopes his idea never gets put into practice.

Nobody likes the thought of a disaster like last January's ice storm or the Alton dam break a few years ago, but Cleverly thinks when they happen, public works departments need an official mechanism to get outside help.

His plan is similar to the system used by police and fire departments, and helps outside towns get reimbursement from the Federal Emergency Management Agency if the emergency is declared a federal disaster.

"It's the first thing I ever did that I hope will never get used," Cleverly said. "Normally you'd call abutting towns, but for a hurricane or ice storm they'd also be affected to some degree. I know people in highway departments around the state, but not well enough to ask them to come 50 miles to help."

Cleverly also said issues like worker's compensation and the need for authorization from selectmen to send personnel and equipment to another town complicate case-by-case arrangements, and possibly waste valuable time during an emergency.

"Before, I would have needed approval from at least two (members) of the board of selectmen," Cleverly said. "It would have been extremely cumbersome."

The New Hampshire Municipal Association sent out mailings to all of the state's 234 municipalities about the agreement recently, said Heather Anderson, the organization's communications director.

So far, Alton, New Boston, New Durham, New Ipswich, Henniker and Washington have signed up.

"It's kind of a record pace," Anderson said. "The contracts have to go before governing boards before being adopted and sent back."

Kelly Clark, Henniker's town administrator, said thinking about the ice storm led to the town to sign.

"It's a good helping neighbor type thing. When you get to a disaster and an emergency it's a formal mechanism for sharing of resources. Sometimes in the past it's happened informally," Clark said.

Anderson said the mutual aid program is additional resource, not a way for towns to circumvent the New Hampshire Emergency Management department.

Gregg Champlin, a spokesman for the state's Office of Emergency Management, said the mutual aid pact is a good supplement to the services already provided by emergency management.

"Let's say we have a situation where there's widespread communication outage," Champlin said. "We may be able to facilitate communications between towns so they can get mutual aid."

Anderson said the pact gives towns access to people with experience in public works so they don't have to hire private contractors.

"Lots of times they have to hire an outside contractor to do work and it may be at a higher rate than towns pay their workers," Anderson said.

During last January's ice storm, New London had no trouble getting help from Enfield, Hanover, Lebanon and Warner, said Richard Lee, the town's road agent. Yet Lee still thinks a mutual aid agreement would have been beneficial.

"Because we didn't have a mutual aid agreement, there was a question of whose insurance the helpers were working under," Lee said. "This will answer questions like that."

Other entities besides towns are helping out with the project. The Technology Transfer Center at the University of New Hampshire is compiling a resource list of equipment and supplies in each of the member towns, which will be available via computer and distributed on paper.