TOWN OF CANTERBURY
BOARD OF SELECTMEN

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TO: Tropical Storm Irene Legislative Committee
FROM: Brian Sear, Canterbury First Selectman

TOWN OF CANTERBURY TROPICAL STORM IRENE PREPARATION AND EXPERIENCE:

Preparation: My personal preparation began in September 2008 and spring 2009, when I took part in two "tabletop exercises" put on by DEMHS. Because I was the only Selectman in each of the exercise groups (approximately 30-40 participants) I was given the role of CEO. In addition, I attended and was certified in a Public Information Officer (PIO) workshop.

Canterbury's direct preparation for Irene was myself, our EMD (Emergency Management Director), and CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) leader attending a meeting at NECCOG (Northeast Connecticut Council of Governments) on Friday, August 26 to discuss preparation. Representatives of DEMHS and Red Cross were in attendance. We all left the meeting confident that systems in place would work, and excited to implement the procedures that we had developed.

Later Friday and Saturday, our EMD and I met in the EOC (Emergency Operations Center) in our Town Hall to get ready for the storm. We researched shelter location information from the Red Cross and set up our Web EOC data management system. We organized our possible CERT response. We also set up our web video broadcasting system that we use for Selectmen's meetings.

We arrived at the EOC at 6 a.m. on Sunday morning. Throughout the storm our Public Works crew, as well as volunteers, drove through Town to assess storm damage. It was remarkable how fast and how massively the damaged occurred. As each incident occurred, we logged it on our map and sent the information to DEMHS through our Web EOC. By about 2 p.m. we had all of the affected areas noted on our master map and had set a list of priorities for power restoration. All web access and normal phone service was down, but I could communicate through my Sprint cell phone. I gave all of our information to our C,L&P rep. She noted that C,L&P had chosen not to attempt any work until Monday morning. I reiterated the fact that restoring power to our commercial center along Route 14 was the highest priority.

Based on safety guidelines, our Public Works crew is under strict orders not to attempt to clear down trees, etc. when power lines are present. This prevented us from accomplishing any significant progress on Sunday.

On Monday morning, we were notified by C,L&P that a crew would be arriving in Town and needed guidance. We met with the crew and gave them our priorities and affected areas. This crew worked for

about an hour and then left. Monday afternoon through Thursday afternoon, C,L&P did not give the OK for work to progress in Canterbury. On Wednesday afternoon, I was called by C,L&P Danielson about 3:30 p.m. and told to put our Public Works crew back on the clock and have them here at the Town Hall to meet incoming work crews and guide them through Town to provide guidance on affected areas and priorities. Indeed, around 4 p.m. on Wednesday a total of about 20 white utility trucks arrived here. From 4 p.m. Wednesday, through 10:30 a.m. Thursday, an 18-hour stretch, they stood idle alongside our Public Works crew, awaiting orders and permission from C,L&P. They were instructed to stay put and not tour the Town. At 10:30 a.m. on Thursday, they were instructed to leave for Eastford. During this 18-hour stretch, I was in hourly contact with C,L&P, notifying them of the inaction.

Finally, during Thursday afternoon, crews from New Hampshire arrived and were given permission to tour the Town with our Public Works Director and start work to restore power. Shortly after inspection began, the leader was instructed to leave Canterbury. In no uncertain terms, he stood firm that Canterbury was in desperate need and he would not leave. He prevailed and the crews' work began. At the same time, C L&P assigned us a dedicated liaison who stayed in our EOC to monitor progress and give constant updates to the Town. This combination of forces worked extremely well, and by Sunday power was restored to most of the Town.

From Sunday through Thursday, I was unable to get any information from C L&P regarding estimates for power restoration and how our priorities would be addressed. Throughout the week, business owners visited me with pleas of hardship. The most visible effect was when the local grocery store had to secure a dumpster to throw away all of its produce due to spoilage.

Complicating the situation was the fact that the Red Cross did not open and staff the shelters it listed on its web site. Shortly after the storm began, locations in Lisbon and Plainfield, Connecticut were listed as active shelters. I referred residents to both of them. Lisbon never opened, or opened for a brief period, then closed. Plainfield refused to accept several Canterbury residents. When members of our CERT team visited the Plainfield shelter on Tuesday, shelter staff was demoralized after having served for more than 20 hours with no information from Red Cross management. The staff present actually thought and hoped that our CERT team was there to relieve them, or, barring that, could provided them with information from Red Cross regarding future plans.

Throughout the outage period, the lack of communication from utilities resulted in widespread rumors and misinformation that complicated matters severely. Responding to this drained energy away from my attending to the immediate needs of the Town, such as food, water, showers, etc. I saw, and still see, the First Selectmen's role as overseeing the direct needs of the Town, acting as a conduit for information from service providers, and helping coordinate with them to serve our Town. Some have suggested that the Selectmen's role is to constantly nag and plead with corporate executives at our utilities and our U.S. and State legislators for relief from the moment a need arises, as in "the squeaky wheel gets the grease." My view is that all responding entities involved in Connecticut disaster response are professionals and should have a well-planned system for coping communicating efficiently and effectively. I hope we can all use this opportunity to develop a system and set of relationships that work.