



MEMO

To: Senate Government Operations Committee

From: Karen Horn, Director, Public Policy & Advocacy (khorn@vlct.org)

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Since the passage of the CARES Act, we are being asked what are municipal needs. The most significant immediate issue with the CARES Act seems to be that local governments of less than 500,000 population receive no direct aid, which means that it is up to the legislature and Governor Scott to allocate assistance from the CARES Act to every city, and town in Vermont.

Local needs created as a result of responding to the COVID 19 pandemic are mounting.

Essential Services and Functions. We are beginning to see increased absenteeism from employees responsible for critical infrastructure such as wastewater, water supply, and essential functions such as law enforcement, emergency management, and road crews conducting essential repairs. In order to maintain social distancing, towns are moving to two shifts so half a crew comes in one week and half the next, or hours are varied to reduce the numbers of employees in one place at one time.

Mutual aid agreements are being recommended to address likely worker shortages as the coronavirus spreads. Emergency medical service protocols are being amended to allow more nimble responses to need. Our staff are working with the Local Roads program to develop guidance on best practices for cleaning shared highway equipment and staying safe.

Telecommunications. Clearly the need for high speed and reliable broadband is critical on all fronts as meetings are held remotely; telemedicine; online banking; education including K-12 remote learning; mental health; mapping of outbreaks and responses, resources, needs, and internet hotspots; remote grocery shopping; mutual aid for critical resources; remote voting and elections; management of volunteers, reliance on social media, and remote working of the general population, is critical.

Governor Scott signed H.681. Cities and towns will move to online meetings immediately.

Responding to a VLCT survey last week (98 responses), municipalities state they are using the following teleconferencing software to work remotely and conduct meetings.

Audio Video Platform	% Municipalities Using
ZOOM	45
GoToMeeting.com	14
None	10
FreeConferenceCal.com	8
Microsoft Teams	8
Skype	5
Google Hangouts	2
Skype for Business	2
Other (Webex, Vimeo, Facetime)	1

Approximately half of the respondents are using more than one platform. Several towns have had to increase their subscriptions to the next level from basic.

Town Buildings, Continuity of Operations and Finance. Town offices are closed. Services such as land records and title searches, marriage license applications, birth or death certificate searches, library lending are not considered critical to public health and safety or economic and national security. At the same time, bills need to be paid, deposits made, payroll met and requests from constituents answered. Our municipal survey question this week is what are towns' biggest COVID 19 operational challenges. Responses will be available at the end of the week.

Looking ahead, towns anticipate fewer tax revenues coming in due to late payments or delinquencies and more requests for abatement, and deferral of payment deadlines. We have surveyed our members regarding their needs for liquidity and borrowing in the event of reduced resources and will have results at the end of the week. We are working with State Treasurer Beth Pearce and Municipal Bond Bank Executive Director Michael Gaughan to respond to those needs.

Staffing levels and both hours and methods of operation that protect employees and keep the government operational are decisions made by the local legislative body or municipal manager. All COVID 19 costs should be (hopefully are being) documented on an on-going basis so that towns are prepared for reimbursement when it becomes available.

We are meeting with the House Ways and Means, Government Operations, Education, and Senate Finance committees this week. Top of agenda for the revenue committees is sorting out the deadlines for filing homestead declaration, payment of property taxes, and the interrelation of municipal and education property taxes.

Coming to Vermont. We are witnessing the continued movement of people into Vermont – to second homes, out of the cities and into less densely populated areas (Vermont) as well as efforts by Vermonters to return home from distant places. The Governor's Addendum 7 to Executive Order 01-20 directs 14-day self-quarantines for anyone coming here from out of state, and instructs visitors with symptoms or from Covid-19 hotspots to not travel to Vermont. Two weeks ago, we would have welcomed the reversal of population out-migration. Today, towns are concerned that they and local purveyors of essential purpose goods may not have the resources to meet the needs of unexpected visitors. This may be a long-term trend as people decide that rural living is preferable to city living, that remote working is feasible, and that amenities to which they are accustomed such as high-speed internet may be available here.

Legislative Action – Government Operations. We urge the committee to provide municipalities authority on an ongoing basis to use electronic signatures.

We urge you to support funding for ensuring that every part of Vermont has access to high-speed internet and the technology to conduct remote meetings and work.

We urge you to strongly recommend that CARES Act funds are available to cities and towns to meet new obligations that arise due to the COVID 19 pandemic.

The link to the VLCT COVID 19 page is <https://www.vlct.org/coronavirus#FAQs>.