

[By Patrick McArdle](#)

Town leaders met with Congressman Peter Welch on Sunday as part of the ongoing effort to win approval from the Federal Emergency Management Agency for reimbursement of about \$4 million that the town has already spent to repair damage from Tropical Storm Irene.

Bennington Town Manager Stuart Hurd and Dan Monks, the town's planning director and zoning administrator, said they met with Welch and Bennington Select Board Chairman Joseph Krawczyk Jr. on Sunday when Welch was in town for the Bennington Battle Day parade.

"The congressman and the two senators (Patrick Leahy and Bernard Sanders) and their staffs have been working pretty hard on our behalf to try to secure funding for us. This was a chance for the congressman to update us on what he's heard and, in fact, for us, we had more recent news than he did," Hurd said.

According to Welch's office, Vermont's Congressional delegation met with FEMA Administrator W. Craig Fugate on Aug. 1 to discuss the biggest issues in Vermont: the state hospital and office complex in Waterbury and Bennington.

After Irene hit Vermont on Aug. 28, the town took action to remediate sections of the Roaring Branch to alleviate concerns that the river could flood in the event of another heavy rain, tropical storm or hurricane.

However, after spending almost \$4 million to shore up the banks of the Roaring Branch and remove debris and sediment from its waters and to repair the town's levee, Bennington officials were told in July the projects would not be eligible for FEMA reimbursement.

The town is working with Witt Associates, of Washington, D.C., which describes itself as a "public safety and crisis management consulting firm," on appealing the decision from FEMA. Hurd said the state was paying for the consultation with Witt.

The question seems to be on what grounds the town will appeal. Monks said staff members from Witt had said FEMA's rejection of Bennington's request was unusual and might serve as the basis in itself.

FEMA gave no explanation of the reason why there would be no federal reimbursement.

"Witt Associates believes that's inappropriate if not a violation of due process so they're trying to figure out that issue. That might be our first route of appeal: 'We can't really appeal this intelligently unless you tell us specifically exactly why you're denying these three (requests),'"  
Monks said.

According to Monks, a state official was expected to request on Monday that FEMA provide a reason for the rejection.

The meeting on Sunday yielded some positive signs for Bennington. Monks said Welch told them that Fugate promised to review the situation. Welch also told the local officials that there was a possibility that if the work was found to have been done to serve a legitimate safety purpose, money could come from the Natural Resource Conservation Service, a department of the United States Department of Agriculture, through FEMA and to the town.

Hurd said Welch told them he expected that the federal legislators expected to have follow-up meetings with Fugate.

"I take great comfort in knowing that the state and our Congressional delegation are working very, very closely with us," Hurd said.