



Office of the Town Manager
Christopher Martino

Warrenton Town Council

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STAFF REPORT

Council Meeting Date:	February 10 th , 2026
Agenda Title:	Post-Emergency Update: Winter Storm Fern
Requested Action:	Receive the Information
Department / Agency Lead:	Office of Emergency Management
Staff Lead:	Johnny Switzer, Emergency Management Coordinator

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Winter Storm Fern was a significant snow and ice event that impacted the Town of Warrenton from January 24 through February 4, 2026. Characterized by heavy snowfall, significant icing, and a subsequent week-long "deep freeze," the storm necessitated the declaration of a Local State of Emergency on January 22, 2026. This report outlines the proactive measures taken by Town staff, the effectiveness of the emergency response, and the ongoing recovery efforts.

Overall, the Town successfully maintained essential services, though the severity of icing and subfreezing temperatures created unprecedented challenges for secondary road clearance and pedestrian accessibility; however, **the strategic acquisition of heavy equipment in the FY26 budget proved to be the decisive factor in the Town's ability to clear primary routes and manage the "snow-crete" conditions.**

CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE ACQUISITION

The FY26 purchase of the Wheel Loader and specialized snowplow attachment was the cornerstone of the Storm Fern response. Prior to this fiscal year, the Town had been unable to secure a dedicated loader since the last unit was sold in 1994. For over three decades, staff relied on smaller, less capable equipment.

Without this machine, the response to Storm Fern would not have reached the level of effectiveness seen in previous years. Standard plows were ineffective against the 6+ inches of sleet and "snow-crete."

The loader allowed Public Works to physically break, lift, and remove massive ice accumulations that would have otherwise remained on the roadway for the duration of the 150-hour deep freeze.

BACKGROUND

On January 22, 2026, the Interim Town Manager, Christopher Martino, in coordination with the Emergency Management Coordinator, Johnny Switzer, declared a Local State of Emergency under Virginia Code § 44-146.21 in anticipation of Winter Storm Ferm.

The Event: The storm began late Saturday, January 24, delivering a mix of snow and sleet. On Sunday, January 25, the region experienced up to 6+ inches of sleet, the highest total in decades, followed by a record-breaking 150+ consecutive hours of subfreezing temperatures.

Impact: The storm caused significant power outages across the Commonwealth and led to a spike in wholesale electricity prices. In Warrenton, the primary challenge shifted from snow removal to managing "snow-crete" (solid-bonded ice on pavement and snowpack) during the deep freeze.

THE VIRGINIA PUBLIC ASSISTANCE (PA) PROCESS

To recover costs through VDEM, the Town must adhere to a strict federal and state regulatory framework:

Step 1: Damage Survey Reports: VDEM and Town staff conduct joint site inspections to validate the scope of work and cost estimates for each damaged site.

Step 2: Eligibility Determination: VDEM categorizes work into Emergency Work (debris removal/life safety) and Permanent Work (restoration of infrastructure like roads and water systems).

Step 3: Cost Sharing: The PA program typically operates on a cost-share basis. Usually, the State government covers 60%–75% of eligible costs, significantly reducing the burden on the Town's general fund.

Step 4: Documentation: Every hour of staff labor and every piece of equipment used must be meticulously logged to ensure reimbursement compliance.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommend the Town Council:

1. **Accept** the Emergency Management Update regarding Winter Storm Ferm and formally confirm the Declaration of a Local State of Emergency issued on January 22, 2026.
2. **Direct** staff to develop a fiscal analysis of Winter Storm Ferm for the March meeting, outlining the budgetary impact of the emergency response and specifying the supplemental appropriations required to reconcile FY26 overtime and operational expenditures.
3. **Recognize** the critical role that the FY26 and all future internal staff and capital asset investments play in maintaining public safety during a historic weather event.

Service Level/Collaborative Impact

The response demonstrated high levels of inter-agency cooperation:

- **Public Works:** Activated Snow Emergency Routes 12 hours in advance. Crews worked 24-hour rotations; however, the transition to ice on January 25 limited the effectiveness of standard plows. **The deployment of the new FY26 Wheel Loader was essential;** while the transition to ice on January 25 limited standard plows, the loader remained operational, clearing heavy ice blockages and ensuring primary emergency routes remained passable for first responders.
- **Public Safety:** The Warrenton Police Department managed the calls for service related to wellness checks, stuck vehicles, and minor traffic incidents.
- **Emergency Management:** The Emergency Management Coordinator successfully provided leadership and overall situational awareness for the duration of the Local State of Emergency.
- **Community Support:** Warming centers were successfully operated at **Town Hall** and the **WARF**, providing refuge for residents without power.
- **Regional Coordination:** Staff remained in constant contact with the Virginia Department of Emergency Management, Fauquier County Government, Dominion Energy, Fauquier Health, and other regional partners to prioritize regional coordination.

Policy Direction/Warrenton Plan 2040

The response to Winter Storm Fern aligns with the core goals of **Plan Warrenton 2040**:

- **Public Facilities & Infrastructure:** The Town's ability to maintain utility uptime (water/sewer) during the deep freeze supports the 2040 plan's goal of providing resilient and reliable public services.
- **Environmental Stewardship:** Pre-treatment strategies were adjusted to minimize salt runoff while ensuring safety, adhering to the plan's focus on protecting local watersheds.
- **Safety & Wellness:** The activation of AlertWarrenton! and the community hotline fulfilled the plan's directive for enhanced community engagement and emergency transparency.

Legal & Fiscal Impact

Legal: All actions taken under the Local Emergency Declaration were consistent with Virginia *Emergency Services and Disaster Law*. The declaration allowed for the suspension of certain administrative procedures to expedite the procurement of emergency de-icing supplies.

Fiscal Impact: Preliminary estimates indicate approximately \$250,000 in preparation, response, and recovery costs from Winter Storm Fern. This includes:

- Personnel Expenses
- Contractor Support (Snow Removal)
- Materials (Salt/Sand/Supplies/Repairs/Equipment)

- Potential reimbursement from VDEM/FEMA is being explored, though the event may not meet the federal threshold for individual assistance.

Local State of Emergency: A local state of emergency was declared effective January 22, 2026, under Code of Virginia § 44-146.21. This declaration was legally required to activate emergency powers, streamline procurement for immediate repairs, and qualify the Town for state and federal financial assistance.

ATTACHMENTS

- A. Declaration of Local Emergency
- B. Termination of Local Emergency
- C. Snow Emergency Route Activation
- D. Press Release – Local Declaration of Emergency
- E. Press Release – Activation of EOP
- F. Winter Storm Fern – Presentation
- G. Resolution – Confirmation of Local Emergency