

MONTPELIER — Last July, as the skies pelted Vermont with record amounts of rain, rivers across the state grew in volume and velocity, ripping through backyards and downtowns. The floods damaged at least 4,000 homes and 800 businesses, and caused \$200 million in damage to public infrastructure. Seven months later, some residents are still displaced.

Under the golden dome, state lawmakers have spent much of the session considering how government policies might reduce the harm that future natural disasters cause to residents.

In the Senate Natural Resources and Energy Committee, they're looking to redesign the system that governs how and where people can construct developments near rivers that could flood during extreme rain events. This week, the committee voted 5-0 in support of S.213, a bill that would require a state permit to build in river corridors — the river and surrounding land where water could meander during high flow times — starting in 2028. The bill, which already faces opposition from Gov. Phil Scott, must pass through the Senate's money committees before the full chamber takes a vote.

Right now, regulations vary widely from one municipality to the next. A major goal of the bill is to transfer responsibility for regulating development in river corridors from municipalities to the state, which can look at river systems and watersheds more holistically.

The legislation would also make major changes to the way the state regulates wetlands and dams. It would require the state to manage for a net gain of wetland acreage, and it would install measures to improve dam safety, such as strengthening oversight and setting up funding mechanisms for emergency and nonemergency dam maintenance and removal.

“The state is in a unique position to be able to look upstream and downstream through a whole watershed and develop a coherent, strategic way of addressing that watershed,” said Sen. Chris Bray, D-Middlebury, who chairs the Senate Natural Resources and Energy Committee. “And so that’s why we’re proposing that the state take a more active leadership role in managing river corridors.”

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