

REMINDER

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Purcaro named Emergency Manager of the Year

By JESSICA CIPARELLI Staff Writer

VERNON — He may have been named “Emergency Manager of the Year,” but Vernon’s Emergency Management Director Michael Purcaro humbly accepts the praise, noting he cannot do the job alone. He credits the town leadership, emergency personnel, the state and federal departments of emergency management and homeland security, and others for the collaborative effort.

Purcaro was nominated by Mayor Ellen Marmer for the award, given by the Northeast States Emergency Consortium, which is based out of Wakefield, Mass., and covers the New England states, plus New York and New Jersey.

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Purcaro receives regional award, says it was a collaborative effort

Purcaro was appointed to the emergency management director position in December 2004. He was notified in July of the NESEC’s decision to select him for the award. There will be a formal ceremony at Camp Rell in September.

“You were selected for this award for exhibiting the highest standards of excellence, dedication, and accomplishment in the field of emergency management,” said Edward S. Fratto, executive director of the NESEC said in a letter to Purcaro. “I personally congratulate you for your commitment to emergency management and for enhancing the public safety of the citizens of Vernon, Conn.”

A lot has happened in terms of emergency management and preparedness in Vernon since December 2004, when Purcaro came on board. Grants have been applied for and received, communication has been upgraded, and the office of emergency management has opened its center of operations on several occasions since 2004, for floods, water main breaks, exercises/drills, and snow storms.

“We have a very active office,” said Purcaro. He noted that ideas he has brought forward have been well-received by the town, which he believes is because they benefit the town as a whole. One example is a grant, which Purcaro called very competitive, in which he assisted Sgt. John Kelley of the Vernon Police Department to secure a state-of-



Emergency Manager of the Year. Michael Purcaro, who has been the Director of Emergency Management in Vernon since December 2004, was recently named “Emergency Manager of the Year”

the-art, night vision goggle system valued at approximately \$7,000. Purcaro noted that many towns applied for the funds, but only a handful received them.

Another grant, valued at approximately \$204,000 and administered by the Federal Department of Homeland Security, called the “Assistance to Firefighters Grant,” has been stretched to make every dollar count. The grant allowed for the purchase of two all-terrain vehicles, a rescue boat, and new firefighter and EMS safety gear. The same grant also funded an accountability system, which provides equipment to create official identification badges for the town and the ability to outfit one of the two new ATVs with a fire/rescue skid, which includes a fire hose and pump, water tank and stretcher.

“I was able to re-direct some of our grant funds to purchase the fire/rescue skid this year,” Purcaro said.

The grant also funded an educational tool called ‘Hazard House’ – a simulator used to teach children about fire prevention and safety in the home. The simulator was custom-built for Vernon and will be utilized by the Office of the Fire Marshal, Purcaro said.

The grant also purchased 25 new self-contained breathing apparatuses for firefighters at the cost of \$50,000 and two new vehicle ventilation systems installed at Station Two and Station Five at the cost of \$60,000. “When starting fire trucks inside the firehouses, especially on those cold days, we wanted to protect our firefighters from breathing in exhaust fumes,” said Purcaro.

All of these items were purchased without spending a single town taxpayer dime, he said. “We really stretched the funding,” said Purcaro of the \$204,000. “It’s been a win-win-win for the fire department, the town, and most importantly, the residents of Vernon.”

Another grant secured, totaling approximately \$150,000 through the State Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security, will enhance communications capabilities. The two year, two-part grant enhances preparedness for the region and also directly benefits Vernon, including the purchase of laptop computers and satellite phone for the Emergency Operation Center at the new Public Safety Complex, as well as two LCD digital projectors and camera equipment. “None of this costs the town money,” Purcaro noted. “It is all from grants, not the town budget. This is new money for the town.”

Communication capabilities at the public safety complex have also been expanded to include a “WANS” system – ‘Wide Area Notification System,’ which allows for emergency personnel to be reached simultaneously, alerting them to the emergency. Within minutes of the initial message, the computer program lets the programmer know who has responded. “We’re the first town in the state to begin implementing this type of system,” Purcaro said. Vernon was also one of the first towns to use “GETS,” the “Government Emergency Telecommunication Service,” which, during an emergency, when phone lines are jammed, will allow emergency personnel to use a special access code to give them priority/pre-emption, pushing other calls off the line. The program has a 99 percent success rate on both land and cell lines, Purcaro said.

Another thing that costs the town very little is Purcaro’s stipend. An Emergency Management Performance Award – a federal award of close to \$10,000 – pays for half of Purcaro’s stipend, his cell phone calls, and a large portion of his office supplies.

Last year, Michael Bova, a firefighter, paramedic, and member of the “RIT – Rapid Intervention Team” (which rescues firefighters), assumed the position of Deputy Director of Emergency Management. It is a

volunteer position, Purcaro said, but the grant also covers Bova's cell calls and office supplies. The office as a whole has swelled to five positions – one stipend position (Purcaro) and four volunteers.

“We’ve been aggressive in securing grant money,” Purcaro said. “I use the word ‘we’ [because] as much as I am honored to receive this award, I have to say that Emergency Management is a collaborative effort between state and federal partners, the town, businesses, and the public. Our success is dependent upon developing good working relationships.” Purcaro credits the strong support of the mayor’s office, fire chief, police chief, EMS supervisor, the bi-partisan support from the Vernon Town Council, and state emergency management and homeland security officials in making the Office of Emergency Management a success.

“During emergencies we find ourselves in the role of liaison,” said Purcaro, of his office, between various state, local and federal agencies. “We direct resources where they are needed to maximize our town’s response.”

Plans for this year include a continued focus to obtain grant money and working with the interim superintendent and his predecessor to complete a Unified School Readiness Plan that would bring a unified approach to the school safety plan among all the town’s schools, including specific training of school officials, Purcaro said.

In addition to his Emergency Management role with the town of Vernon, Purcaro was recently voted onto the executive board of CEMA – Connecticut Emergency Management Association – is the Chief Contracting and Grants Officer for the state Department of Public Health, an intermittent employee of the Federal Department of Homeland Security’s National Disaster Medical System, a Certified Advanced Public Information Officer by FEMA, and a National Emergency Risk Communications Trainer by the CDC.

Purcaro’s philosophy is that everything begins and ends with the town’s response to an emergency. “I’m a firm believer in that all emergencies start and end at the local level,” said Purcaro. “We have to be ready at the local level to respond – this is one of our guiding principles.”

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