

OPINION: Invest in water infrastructure or more floods will follow

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Flooding in Toronto and surrounding communities has, once again, brought the state of Ontario's water infrastructure into the spotlight. While underground and out of sight, our failing infrastructure should not come as a surprise. The systems in use today were put in place by our grandparents.

We are witnessing the consequences of underinvestment in maintaining these systems and failing to expand them to account for the tremendous growth across the GTA. The region's water and wastewater systems were not built for today's demands, and investments have not kept pace.

The choice is clear: either invest consistently and sustainably, or pay for the costs of more frequent failures and their more expensive cleanups.

Modern water infrastructure consists of three integrated systems: delivering clean drinking water, removing sewage, and managing stormwater. Following the e-coli crisis in Walkerton in 2000, governments understandably shifted their focus onto drinking water infrastructure to ensure the Walkerton tragedy was not repeated. For nearly 25 years however, this has come at the expense of the other two-thirds of our critical water infrastructure. The consequences of this underinvestment are now being laid bare.

The July 2013 storm that resulted in flash flooding across the GTA caused \$940 million of damage in Toronto alone, becoming the most expensive natural disaster in Ontario's history. Homeowners saw insurance premiums rise by as much as 20% across the GTA. And this was not an isolated incident, but rather indicative of an escalating trend.

The Insurance Bureau of Canada reports that insured catastrophic losses in Canada now routinely exceed \$2 billion annually due mostly to water-related damage. This is up from \$456 million annually in the decade prior to 2008.

The Financial Accountability Office of Ontario estimates a \$16.4 billion backlog in state-of-good-repair (SOGR) work across the province's existing water systems. This does not include the need to expand system capacity to keep up with growth in our region, it is merely a reflection of what needs to be fixed to bring existing water infrastructure assets back to par.

It is clear that we need to decide whether we want to pay for the infrastructure fix now, or wait until the next storm causes billions more in property damage.

Political leaders are quick to state their empathy to help with cleanup and talk about the realities of climate change, but they ignore their own culpability as to how we got here, nor are they acting to prepare for the increased frequency of severe weather events.

Ontario's population is growing by 200,000 people per year, with most of these people moving into the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA). That's equivalent to the population of the City of Burlington moving in every year. But we certainly aren't building an entire city's worth of new infrastructure every year across the region to account for this growth, nor are we investing enough to maintain our existing infrastructure in working order.

When the majority of the current network of sewers and stormwater infrastructure was designed and built, our population was smaller, surfaces were more permeable so they drained better, and the weather patterns were different. Sewer and stormwater capacity has not increased enough to keep up with the growing deluge. We must be more aggressive in the revitalization of this critical infrastructure to account for the changing climate and changing needs of our growing city, because the design capacity from 40 years ago is no longer up to standard.

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