

LILLEY: Last week's flood result of city hall inaction

[Brian Lilley](#) Published Jul 21, 2024

The flooding this past week in Toronto is being blamed on climate change by Mayor Olivia Chow and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. The reality is, it's the result of bad planning and a lack of investment in the kind of infrastructure we need to deal with storms like we saw on Tuesday.

I'm not making this statement to start a debate about climate change, this is about pointing out that city officials have made this claim in the past and done nothing about it.

[A city report](#) issued after the 2013 flood said that there would need to be new programs and mitigation measures to “reflect the reality of climate change and include investments for municipal water and sewer infrastructure that can mitigate the risks from future storm events that are anticipated to increase both in frequency and severity.”

That obviously did not happen then and allowing politicians to pull out climate change like a get-out-of-jail-free card is unacceptable.

The 2013 storm dropped nearly 140 mm of rain, or five and a half inches, that lead to flooding across the city. This past week's flooding saw roughly 98 mm, or just shy of four inches, and we had flooding in most of the same places.

More than a decade after the city was warned and pledged to ensure these sorts of events didn't occur again, we got the same kind of flooding in the same places with just 70% of the rainfall of 11 years ago.

The city clearly needs to do a better job of stormwater management, which can include mitigation methods like retention ponds, swales or constructed wetlands. What can't be ignored, though, is that the city also needs to invest in upgrading sewers and stormwater management pipes under the ground.

A 2021 study by the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario detailed the age and state of our water systems.

“In Toronto, there are more than 6,000 km of watermains (13% are 80-100 years of age and 11% are more than 100 years old),” [the report stated](#).

In any given year, the city only replaces about 35 to 50 km of watermains or 0.6-.9% annually. The replacement rate for stormwater pipes was even lower they found.

Now, consider the growth of Toronto, not just in the suburbs but in the core where condo tower after condo tower has gone up. We are putting increasing pressure on aging infrastructure and then wondering why it fails when placed under stress like the storm last week.

We can't solve flooding at Union Station by using non-permeable pavers or green rooftops and a rain tax won't solve this situation either. We need to invest in the infrastructure needed to deal with water on all fronts and that means pipes.

In December 2017, [council voted down a proposal](#) that would have increased water bills but would have put \$786 million into fixing the pipes.

Far too often, municipal politicians vote against fixing the crucial infrastructure beneath our feet because there are no votes in doing so, only outrage over construction. It's far easier, and politically beneficial, to vote for the shiny new bobble that comes with a photo-op than to do what is right.

This week, in response to the flooding, Mayor Chow said the city is "\$26 billion short, over 10 years to fix the old infrastructure."

That's because city council has and continues to put nice-to-have items like bike lanes and renaming public squares against actual priorities like sewers.

Chow has put forward [a motion to this week's council meeting](#) calling for an increase in green efforts to deal with flood mitigation. Any solution that doesn't include new pipes can't and shouldn't be taken seriously.