

# Lessons from Toronto's ice storm

Toronto City Councillor Joe Mihevc suggests 10 items the city should discuss in the aftermath of the 2013 ice storm.

**By:** Joe Mihevc Published on Mon Dec 30 2013 Toronto Star

As we near the end of the power outage, it is not too early to draw together some gleanings from the ice storm of 2013. I offer 10 thoughts from my perspective as a city councillor to spark the debriefing discussion that is sure to follow in the weeks ahead:

- 1) We take the city's infrastructure for granted. We are a densely populated large city with a complicated infrastructure. Each modern system, be it hydro, water or public transit, is so important to sustain urban life. Crises like this one remind us of life's basics.
- 2) Hydro staff, city staff and other related public and private service workers did a great job and deserve a big thank you. City staff gave up holidays, worked extra hours, some of which will not be compensated, and generally did their best to hold the city together.
- 3) We need to think about ways to better mobilize and co-ordinate community volunteer energy and resources in times of emergency. A power outage for a few days is never just about a power outage. It is about frail people needing supports; about people with mobility difficulties in highrise buildings; about drop-in centres and places to stay; and about knowing community resources that could be engaged for assistance. There were many people who were willing to help this past week, but did not find a mechanism to do so.
- 4) Elected officials need to be seen as strategic partners with the emergency management office's communications centre. Elected officials probably have the best neighbourhood e-lists, Twitter and Facebook followers, community leaders, etc. They are in an excellent position to know best what is happening on the ground, and the resources that are available to help in each neighbourhood. Regular in-person briefings and the establishment of key councillor advisers to help manage crises have to be a part of emergency management.
- 5) You can't have too much communication with the public. People want to know the latest. They want to understand the plan. They want assurances that their concerns are being heard. Communication needs to be delivered from the point of view of people trying to figure out what to do for heat; how to empty water pipes and radiators; how to repair the hydro mast at the side of their home; and who to call if they need support. One of the greatest frustrations residents experienced in this emergency was getting through to the Toronto Hydro call centre. Should the city's 311 be the single, central interface for Toronto Hydro and other critical infrastructure?
- 6) Toronto needs to examine burying its hydro wires on a multi-year plan. One can appreciate Toronto Hydro's reluctance for financial reasons. However, it is now clear that the cost of these kinds of storms needs to be a part of the calculation. If the Ontario Energy Board has a concern with altering the cost/benefit calculation for burying wires, and providing the financial resources necessary to do the work, then the province needs to direct the OEB to a different policy. The work can be done over a 20-year period as streets get reconstructed.
- 7) We have lost approximately 20 per cent of the city's tree canopy. Burying hydro infrastructure would also better protect our urban forest.

8) Toronto Hydro and many city divisions have been increasingly contracting out services. Recovery from the storm is now taking longer because of staff shortages in many service areas. It begs the question: have we contracted out too much, leaving us vulnerable in times of crisis? What is the best level of staffing to ensure an internal city capacity to manage emergencies?

9) Leadership matters. Once again the mayor showed himself incapable of leading at a critical time for the city. Thankfully, multiple leaders emerged to fulfil the role and liaise with key decision-makers, although through various means rather than with efficient, strategic collaboration and focus. Thankfully, these emergent leaders secured basic resources, managed the crisis and prepared the city to get back to its regular activities.

10) Emergency preparedness. A resilient city knows that these kinds of incidents are likely to increase in the years ahead. How prepared are we? Should we be demanding generators for all multi-residential buildings? Should building codes be amended to provide for backup power systems? We need a third party review of the way we handled this emergency.

Now that the immediate crisis has been overcome, we need to learn from it with meaningful debriefing discussions and follow-up actions from our collective experience of the ice storm.  
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