

Clean-up begins after huge rainstorm prompted state of emergency

By Allison Young

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FINGAL – Repairs and clean-up continued this weekend in Southwold Township, a largely rural municipality southwest of London, after roughly nine inches of rain caused widespread flooding and damage, prompting local officials to declare a state of emergency.

Southwold Mayor Grant Jones said most damage is to gravel roads around the communities of Fingal and Shedden, where infrastructure was not designed to handle that much rain (230 millimetres) in such a short period of time, 90 minutes.

Some repairs are expected to take up to two weeks, including work on Centre Street in Fingal, which will need to be repaved. Jones said culverts were unable to handle the volume of water, causing it to wash over the road and lift sections of pavement. The street remains open, he said.

Jones said the first thing people impacted by flooding should do is contact their insurance company, but he said he's also in conversation with Municipal Affairs Minister Rob Flack, a local MPP, and other provincial officials about funding to help those affected. He said he expects more information about the funding to be available within days.

Friday marked the second major rainfall event to hit the township within six days, which Jones said "stretched our capabilities to the maximum." More rain is expected in the days ahead, with Environment Canada forecasting thunderstorms Sunday.

George Henshaw was one of several residents on Fowler Street in Fingal whose basement flooded during Friday's mega-storm. He said he had to rip out the underpad from his basement carpet and remove damaged furniture, piling everything into a trailer with his neighbour, Jason McLellan.

Despite his own flooded basement, Henshaw said his neighbour across the street suffered even more damage.

"They got hit worse, water pouring in (their) basement window," he said. "I feel so bad for them because that's twice in a matter of two weeks that happened because of no drainage."

Henshaw said drains in the area have been blocked off because of construction along Union Road, which intersects with Fowler Street.

Fingal is one of several rural communities undergoing development, with some residents, including Henshaw, concerned ongoing construction is contributing to the flooding. Jones

pushed back on those concerns, saying the amount of rainfall would have overwhelmed the township's infrastructure regardless of the ongoing work.

"Staff has done everything in their capabilities to keep things operating. Obviously, with construction in Fingal and Shedden, it's not been well-received. I know that the construction's been blamed for some of it. I don't think that's true," he said.

"Our infrastructure does not handle those types of rain events. Going forward, once we're done in Fingal, it'll be better, but with the rain we had . . . the new infrastructure wouldn't handle it either."

Jones said most of the township's infrastructure is designed to handle one to two inches of rain over a 24-hour period, far less than the amount that fell Friday. "It's a one-in-250-year storm that happened in 90 minutes. I don't think you can build infrastructure large enough to handle that."

Slobodan Simonovic, professor emeritus of civil and environmental engineering at Western University, said the one-in-250-year designation should be treated with caution.

"Historical information to derive the consequences of extreme precipitation events in the future is not sufficient anymore," Simonovic said. "Climate variability, climate change, global warming and so on, are changing the physical conditions, how the atmosphere handles that moisture and I am very much convinced that we will be seeing this type of storms much more often in the future."

Simonovic said communities have two paths: Improve infrastructure to help protect against weather changes, and moving people away from floodplains.

"My understanding is that what they are doing in these townships is actually revising or improving the stormwater systems and that these are one way of responding to the changing conditions or the increase in frequency in magnitude of future flooding," he said. "However, how far can you go? How big of pipes can you put in?"

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