

# Egan: Ottawa's heart was already beaten. Then the floor fell in



[Kelly Egan, Ottawa Citizen](#)

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Downtown Ottawa looked grizzled and rough before the sinkhole struck. Then the damn floor fell in.

Honestly, it is difficult to remember a summer when the city's heart looked so tattered and beaten. The National Arts Centre has its "good side" ripped off while a painful facelift is underway.

Wiser heads decided it was a good time to erect scaffolding on the National War Memorial and put wooden hoarding around the whole plaza, making it uncrossable. Old Union Station, now the Government Conference Centre, looks God-awful right now: scaffolding and black netting; cranes and scarring.

Not to mention the never-ending work on Parliament Hill, the Rideau Centre facade and the dusty building of Ogilvy Square on the centre's east side. And Queen Street, the royal mess.

To walk around the site Thursday was to find confusion.

Rideau Centre general manager Cindy VanBuskirk was clearly putting out fires left, right and centre. As we strolled in, she was dealing with food sellers in the 200-store mall who had just learned of a shutdown by the city's health department due to drinking water worries.

This included about 25 to 30 outlets, including the food court. And this on a morning when the main entrance was still shut.

"We're a massive hub in the heart of downtown Ottawa," she said. "The minute transit is impacted, it becomes an issue, because people rely on their daily traffic pattern through the property to get from A to B."

Absolutely. The Rideau Centre is plugged into the city's urban fabric unlike any other major mall. It is much more than a collection of stores: it has an estimated 20 million visitors a year, major transit stations, sales among Canada's top 10 malls.



Second Cup remained open in the Rideau Centre despite other food merchants being told to close as Ottawa deals with the massive sinkhole on Rideau Street. Wayne Cuddington

Only a handful of times in 25 years has the mall been forced to close or evacuate, she recalled: the War Memorial shooting of Oct. 22, 2014, the great power outage of August 2003.

“It can be quite chaotic and troublesome for people.” And then her city councillor’s office was on the line, and she had to run.

(It is guesswork, but the economic consequences for merchants in the mall and supporting street must be, on the whole, enormous. Retail watchers say it generates sales in excess of \$1,000 a square foot annually.)

The loss of daily foot traffic certainly matters to high-volume dealers like Michel’s Bakery Café, not far from the Mackenzie King Bridge. After a shutdown by a health inspector, owner Umut Ozerkan sent his staff home for the day. He was confused over the water issue: some sellers were allowed to remain open, others not. He feared he would have to ditch a good part of his inventory as spoilage. His losses could top \$6,000.

“Is this coffee bad?” asked a passerby, holding a container from Second Cup. He had no answer.

A good part of Sussex Drive north of the sinkhole looked deserted, due to the flow of traffic being cut at Rideau.

Cynthia Ryan was alone at the cash inside a jewelry store, Jade, at about 11 a.m. We were the first visitors in an hour.

She recalled the alarming smell of natural gas on Wednesday from a broken line and spoke of intermittent phone coverage, which was affecting her debit/credit terminal. And traffic outside was a trickle.

“There’s this extra level of vulnerability you feel because of the failure of infrastructure.”

She called the tourist trade “massively” important to Sussex merchants and wondered if the ByWard would suffer because it’s now harder to reach.

Nearby, Andre Schad, who runs an upscale clothing boutique, was more optimistic. He said tourism is a “huge deal” for stores, but added: “Now they have another tourist attraction, a giant hole.” (Indeed, it drew gawkers aplenty.)

To contact Kelly Egan, please call 613-726-5896 or email [kegan@postmedia.com](mailto:kegan@postmedia.com)

[Twitter.com/kellyegancolumn](https://twitter.com/kellyegancolumn)