

# Editorial: Sinkhole syndrome



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Published on: June 10, 2016

Ottawa Citizen



Workers get a close-up look as Ottawa deals with the massive sinkhole on Rideau Street. Wayne Cuddington

The great Ottawa sinkhole spawned a good-natured collection of jokes, from Godzilla gags to swipes about disappearing taxpayers' money. It was a social media star, a Twitter trendsetter. But now we need a serious conversation. What caused the crater that abruptly opened on Rideau Street near Sussex Drive? Had there been fatalities, no one would be laughing.

And as it turns out, deaths were a distinct possibility. Just minutes before the sinkhole appeared Wednesday, an OC Transpo bus carrying as many as 40 or 50 people drove over the weakening road. Ottawa could have been staring at a major civic disaster. As with the 2014 Waller Street sinkhole, we were lucky.

So far, Mayor Jim Watson and staff have done what they can to provide information. They held press conferences two days in a row to answer what questions they could, with further updates promised.

Now we need those updates. It's known the area has a "hidden valley aquifer" – a sort of gap running along the bedrock that is filled in by soil, sand, silt or other material. Something caused a

sudden, massive shift in that soil, with a consequent loss of support for the roadway above it. Did the water pipes break, thus blasting high-pressure torrents of water into the sand and soil, pushing it out of place? Or was it already shifting, causing the mains to break? (They're relatively modern.) If the latter, did excavation work nearby cause this? Experts from the Rideau Transit Group, which is building the LRT, were onsite Friday, but not yet talking publicly.

There will be added help for investigators: Because of the amount of roadwork that has taken place along Rideau Street, the city has scads of data available about the impacts of construction.

We may eventually discover man-made reasons for this particular roadway cavern, but it's also possible the sinkhole resulted from infrastructure failure, the sort of thing that has happened elsewhere.

As an example, Paul Van Geel, chair of the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Carleton University, points to the slow deterioration of a storm-sewer pipe that caused a sinkhole on a Highway 174 ramp in 2012. Canada, he points out, has a serious and widespread infrastructure deficit. Our safety depends on reliable infrastructure. So, too, does our economy.

Certainly the merchants of Rideau and Sussex, who lost business this week, know that all too well. With the streets now stable and repairs underway, area Coun. Mathieu Fleury hopes shoppers will come downtown on the weekend to support their shops.

Meanwhile, although we've enjoyed the sinkhole jokes, it's now time to dig for causes.