

# What caused the huge sinkhole in downtown Ottawa

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A large sinkhole opened in the heart of Ottawa, devouring a minivan and leaving officials scrambling as the nation's capital prepares to host a North American leaders summit later this month.

A burst main sent water gushing into a construction site under Rideau Street, dislodging the soil as pavement folded into the expanding cavern. By the time the damage was contained, the sinkhole extended the entire width of the street. A gas line also ruptured, leaving an offensive smell lingering in the downtown core.

The gaping hole is just east of the intersection of Rideau Street and Sussex Avenue, which is part of the route between Parliament Hill and the National Art Gallery, where Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will host U.S. President Barack Obama and Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto for a June 29 summit.

"No city wants to see this kind of a sinkhole," Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson said, noting that it occurred at one of the city's major intersections. "The mayor of any G7 capital has experienced sinkholes. This is not something new and unique to the city of Ottawa. ... First and foremost, I'm proud of our emergency response. They worked quickly. They ensured that no one was injured. No one was missing. They evacuated the tunnel as quickly as possible."

At the time of the flooding, workers were digging under the location to excavate the remaining 50 metres of tunnel for a light rail line that is scheduled to open in 2018. The workers were immediately removed. Nearby buildings, including the Rideau Centre mall, were evacuated as a precaution.

At a media briefing, city officials said that section of the tunnel is being dug through soft sand, which requires a different approach than other parts of the tunnel that are now complete.

Mr. Watson said it is too early to say what caused the sinkhole. Water in the hole must be drained before the city can determine what happened. He also said it is too early to say whether the sinkhole is connected to the tunnelling activity in the area.

In 2014, a sinkhole occurred near the University of Ottawa that officials later said was probably caused by light rail tunnelling. The city also experienced a high-profile sinkhole in 2012 on a highway off-ramp. A driver was injured when his car fell into the hole.

The latest sinkhole is roughly above an area that will ultimately be the Rideau station light rail stop when the transit line opens in 2018. Station entrances are currently being built to the east and west of the sinkhole.

Rideau Street had already been closed to regular traffic because of the construction, but it had been open to buses and taxis. Buses have since been rerouted, adding to an already congested downtown where many key road lanes are closed because of the light rail project and other infrastructure work.

Ottawa Police Chief Charles Bordeleau could not say whether the sinkhole and road closings will require changes to the plans for the June 29 leaders summit in downtown Ottawa.

“It’s too early to tell exactly what the impact will be on the traffic patterns for any motorcades,” he said. “We’ll be continuing to work closely with the city to see how exactly how long it will take to remediate the scene, and if we have to make adjustments to any motorcade routes, we will do so.”