

# HAMILTON TATOR

## Emergency! Where's our emergency plan?

I fear that Hamilton is not capable of coping with disaster

Hamilton Spectator  
By Allan Bonner

We wrongly assume the police, fire, EMS, mayor and relevant ministries are fulfilling their primary responsibility to keep us safe.

But according to studies of plans from the top 100 English-speaking cities in the world, this isn't the case.

We see TV footage of devastation by floods, brush fires, earthquakes and tornadoes in the American south and may smugly think it can't happen here. But it can.

Many civic emergency plans in Ontario and around the world may actually pose more of a risk than the threats they're meant to address.

Many plans are so old, they violate the law. One evacuation order killed more people than the emergency. Contra flow (all roads leading out) has been called "potentially life-threatening" by Brian Wolshon of Louisiana State University. Others say it's a "fantasy" to think that residents will use private cars to move to safety when up to 56 per cent of urbanites don't own one. It might take 50 hours to evacuate a city of one million, with no services along the route. Public transit is rarely mentioned and the latest, best guidance on urban evacuation is in a 1984 FEMA document. This is not, as they say, close enough for government work.

Have recent ice storms, power outages, SARS and the continent's largest peace-time evacuation during the Mississauga train derailment in 1979 made us smarter in Ontario? No.

Barrie's plan (2008) refers to specific assistance from the federal HRDC ministry. This assistance doesn't exist. London is the only city in North America found to call a Level 1 emergency the worst out of 3 (most use Level 3 as the worst). Guelph's plan notes "no single province-wide system ..."

Hamiltonians are living in one of those cities we occasionally see on TV trying to cope with disaster without adequate plans.

My researchers and I wanted to find out more from Hamilton emergency planners, but we received no response to calls and emails over about 30 days. We had to rely on Hamilton's written plan.

Did we really need to read of the emergency governance and legal structure? Is anyone safer as a result of reading the list of 13 city departments and agencies that make up the emergency management program committee? Does listing 10 obvious threats (weather, terrorism, road accidents, etc.) speed response? We find that 13 different people can activate the emergency

notification procedure and emergency operations centre. But can they also declare an emergency?

Does anyone care that the policy group "is comprised of the head of council (HOC) in the assigned role and authority during an emergency, or the mayor and members of council sitting as city council at any regular or special meeting called during an emergency situation." Can city council sit as anything other than city council? Oddly, this policy group can't manage an emergency, but can declare one over.

There are 14 pages of roles and responsibilities containing five organizational charts and the 13 units and branches that report to the operations section chief, who is (logically) in the operations section. Illogically, there are five branches reporting to the operations section chief who reports to the public works branch co-ordinator. Over in what may be the planning department (but not so plainly named), units report to a chief who reports to a section.

As the British say when something is of absolutely no interest: "How interesting."

Hamilton is one of two North American cities found to be appended a PowerPoint, which doesn't make complete sense without the presenter:

"Response in Ontario & Canada starts at the ground level" (including high-rise fires & mining accidents?).

"No automatic call for the cavalry" (911 and fire alarms are disabled in Hamilton?).

We are told that emergency management is "cyclical, ongoing, continuous ..." It would

make as much sense if it were linear, finite and continual. This plan "is not an 'end' but a piece to the process" — small piece perhaps.

Clive Thompson writing in New York magazine notes, "Perhaps PowerPoint is uniquely suited to our modern age of obfuscation ... If you have nothing to say, maybe you need just the right tool to help you not say it." This would be funny, except he was noting that PowerPoint helped cause the crash of the space shuttle Columbia.

Some other city's emergency plans do have something to say — Boston's climate change study, Kansas City's dealing with pets, for whom residents will risk their lives, and Richmond, B.C.'s links to great information on personal preparedness.

Oakville lists the shelf-life of food for sheltering in place. Mississauga has a summer emergency camp. Oshawa lists hidden water sources in our homes, and Guelph has good advice on car kits and go bags.

If Hamilton or any other city lacks the money or time to write the perfect plan, a summer student intern could crib the best advice from publicly available plans and cut and paste it into a better document than is on most of the city websites in Ontario.

Allan Bonner ([allanbonner.com](http://allanbonner.com)) was the first North American to be awarded a post-graduate degree in risk, crisis and disaster management from Leicester University, U.K., and has practised in the field for 30 years. The research cited is from his new book, "Safer Cities of the Future."