

Auckland considered world leader for emergency plan

Alicia Burrow, National, Tuesday, 2 February 2016, 1:57PM



Auckland has a stand-out civil emergency plan that other global cities should learn from.

That's an American academic's findings after surveying 100 English-speaking cities around the globe on how realistic their planning is in the event of a civil emergency – and Auckland came out on top.

University of Toronto Crises Management Researcher Dr Allan Bonner said many cities have 'fantasy expectations' and unrealistic visions of the future documented should a disaster occur and it's becoming an increasing concern in academia.

But Dr Bonner said Auckland Council has a good grasp on how prepared residents are for an emergency because of how detailed emergency actions plans are for citizens.

For example, he said while only seven percent of Aucklanders have a 'go bag' ready for an emergency, at least the council knows how low that figure is.

He said many American cities have an 'assumptions' section in planning documents that include such guess-work as expecting people to vacate town quickly with their own vehicle. However, up to 56 percent of American urbanites do not own a car and use other forms of transport - faults that can make a natural or civil event that much more deadly.

Auckland's also one of just two cities surveyed that had worked out the impact of an outer-space event such as solar flares causing power-outages, and it doesn't stop there. Auckland's Emergency Management Group Plan 2010- 2015 not only details how prepared people are but also exactly how much a disaster would disable the economy.

If Rangitoto were to erupt it could result in a 14 percent reduction in the country's GDP - that's twice the financial dent caused by the great depression. He said specific detail like that puts Auckland at the front of the pack.

Dr Allan Bonner has previously worked for numerous US heads of government, G8 and UN delegations, the WTO and NATO.

Emergency preparedness

Daniel MacEachern

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St. John's not prepared for major disaster: author

St. John's has no plan in place for a major disaster, says an expert in crisis management who has studied the emergency plans of 100 cities around the world.

“St. John's essentially has nothing,” Allan Bonner told The Telegram. “It's uncommon to have nothing. It is not uncommon to have jargon, acronyms, pages of civic leaders who have contributed to the plan, roles and responsibilities, reporting mechanisms and all kinds of stuff that doesn't make any sense to the general public.”

About a dozen cities, said Bonner, have comprehensive information for residents about what to do in emergencies. Search for “emergency” or “disaster” on the City of St. John's website, and the results are a checklist of measures to prevent basement flooding, links to general federal information about preparing a supply kit and common types of emergencies, and how to protect pets in a disaster.

Emergency plans are usually a legal requirement for governments, noted Bonner, but because disasters are not daily occurrences, it's easy for the issue to remain a low priority.

“No politician gets elected on saying he's going to be able to evacuate the place quicker than any other politician,” he said. “It's just not something that would help get you elected or be politically attractive. The police are catching bad guys, the fire department's putting out fires, and writing this plan for an event that

you can't predict and you don't know if it'll ever happen, it indeed becomes less of a priority.”

Even tasking a summer student — from a relevant field — with studying plans from other communities to provide guidance would be an improvement in St. John's and many other places, said Bonner.

“If you could take a look at the best plans in the world, basically steal the best ideas or benchmark them, as they say,” he said. “That would be the quickest way to do it. You'd have to customize for St. John's, because you have weather and you have not a lot of places where it rains sideways, but you don't have tornadoes and volcanoes and what have you, but you do need shelter in place, evacuation routes, and all that sort of stuff that you can find decent versions of in other cities.”

There may also be emergency policies and procedures that the city doesn't have listed, acknowledged Bonner — after the blackout of early 2014, the city began adjusting its protocols for warming centres in St. John's — but unless plans are set out for the public, they're not of much use, he said.

Mayor Dennis O'Keefe did not respond to requests for comment Monday. City offices were closed for the Orangemen's Day holiday.

The Toronto-based Bonner, who holds a master's degree in risk, crisis and disaster management from the University of Leicester, will publish his research in mid-August in the book “Safer Cities of the Future.”