

Questions and Answers:

What happened?

Early in the morning of September 3rd, the soil under a property in Falmouth gave way and the home's floor dropped, damaging the structure of the home and causing some of the home's contents to slide into the hole.

Thankfully, no one was hurt but the home has been significantly damaged.

The RCMP and the Hantsport Fire Department were first on the scene and they ensured the family members were safe and assisted in securing the building. As well, fire fighters went door to door in the immediate area and spoke with as many residents who were home at the time to see if other properties had noted anything unusual happening to their residences or properties. **None had noted anything unusual at the time, nor have there been any issues identified since.**

The Regional Emergency Management Organization (REMO) Office was partially opened as a precaution. REMO staff arrived on site to evaluate the situation and determine the extent of the event. A structural engineer and geotechnical engineer were called in to:

- a) Assess the condition of the building to determine if there was an immediate risk to it collapsing. It was determined that there was no immediate risk but that the building would have to come down and the property remediated.
- b) The geotechnical engineer examined the property and surrounding neighbourhood and the underlying geology of the area and gave the opinion that this event was an unpredictable random low risk event associated with the underlying bedrock type of the entire Windsor area.

What is a geotechnical engineer and what do they do?

A geotechnical engineer is a professional who investigates underground conditions and materials; determines the relevant physical/mechanical and chemical properties of these materials; evaluates the stability of natural slopes and man-made soil deposits; assesses risks posed by site conditions.

What about all the reports about sink holes?

People have safely lived in the Windsor/West Hants area for over 250 years. On occasion, there have been incidents of "sink holes" in roadways, fields, etc. This is the first incident affecting a residence that anyone can recall.

Could this happen to my house?

With gypsum (the natural bedrock type of the entire Windsor area), as a natural phenomenon, the probability of a similar event occurring is no greater today than the day

before this unfortunate incident occurred. The risk has been described to us by our geotechnical consultant as a "general, low occurrence risk".

Why is it being reported that there is a "high risk" in West Hants?

We understand that a Department of Natural Resources employee was interviewed and apparently used the words "high risk" during the interview. We don't know the context in which the phrase was used. We do know that the Province has not advised the Municipality that West Hants is a "high risk" area.

The Municipality understands that, compared to other parts of the province, the Windsor/West Hants area is at higher risk of a soil failure due to our gypsum topography. But as advised by the geotechnical engineer, **there is no evidence of elevated risk because of this one incident**, and the risk is better described as a "general, low occurrence risk".

Is the Municipality withholding information from the public?

No, the Municipality has not withheld and is not withholding information concerning the risk to other properties. Some information about the individual property is not being released to respect the privacy interests of the property owners. Any investigations carried out by any insurers are only available for release if the insurers consent to do so or as required by law.

We have released the non-private information we have from the structural and geotechnical engineers in press releases, interviews with members of the press, phone calls and emails. We do not know why the soil failed at that particular location, at that particular time. Beyond the fact that most of the area in and around Windsor has a bedrock type that is subject to what the geotechnical engineer calls a "general, low occurrence risk" of random sinkholes, we don't know if there were contributing factors such as construction techniques or heavy rainfalls. We don't know where or when a similar occurrence might happen in the future.

The Municipality will be working with professionals to determine what further investigation, if any, needs to be done. In addition, the property owner and its insurer will likely try to determine the underlying cause.

We do know this type of significant event doesn't happen frequently. We also know that it was an unpredictable event, isolated to a localized area.

What is the Municipality going to do about this?

The Municipality is concerned about public safety and during the early hours of this event, took steps to confirm the unfortunate incident was random and limited to the one property, subject to only a generalized low risk throughout the entire Windsor area that has historically not resulted in many incidents. We have also ensured that access to the property is

restricted and will work with the property owners to remove the structure and remedy the property as soon as possible. The house and property are currently stable.

Why does the Municipality allow homes to built in potential risk areas?

To prohibit development wherever this bedrock type is prevalent would be a very dramatic change for such a low risk, and it may be beyond the Municipality's authority. The Municipality has no control over natural resources above or under the ground. We have the authority to design and plan for the use of the land for sustainable economic development. Council, with input from the public, sets the type of uses for land through zoning and subdivision by-laws. We consider where people currently live, what the neighbourhood could look like and how we can provide services efficiently and economically.

Based on these controls, land owners and/or developers decide when, where and what they want to put on the land. Without people living in the community, there is no community.

Professionals like architects and engineers design the structures and ensure they are suitable to the physical characteristics of the land. The builders build them and the Municipality inspects them to ensure the builder is meeting the building codes, regulations and standards determined by professional and regulatory bodies. Real estate agents sell the houses and the Municipality provides the services likes roads, fire, police and emergency protection, water, sewer and waste collection, to name a few.

Many people are involved in the acquisition, development and servicing of land including the provincial and federal governments who determine the standards and restrict the use of land based on what is important to them.

Didn't the Municipality say it would do more testing?

Yes, on the day of the incident, prior to receiving the report from the geotechnical engineer, the Municipality considered undertaking a broader examination. The Municipality will be working with professionals to determine the appropriate scope of any geotechnical and historical investigation and what steps, if any should be taken.

How could this incident affect property values?

The value of property changes over time because is it primarily based on the what a willing buyer is prepared to pay and the seller to accept. There is no way to predict the affect this isolated incident could have on individual properties in the immediate area, if at all.

The Property Valuation Services Corporation (PVSC) determines the assessment value for all properties in Nova Scotia. In simple terms, the assessment is based on the value of the sale of comparable homes in the area at a point in time (market value), usually the year previous to the tax billing cycle; and the value of any new construction, renovations and demolitions which have occurred on the property.

If I have concerns about my property, what should I do?

1. You could check your property and your home for unusual cracks in your foundation or walls;
2. You could contact your builder or developer to ask them questions about the construction of your home;
3. You could contact your insurance company for advice; or
4. You can go on line to the Provincial Department of Natural Resources website to view the maps and information they have on line.

Will the Municipality pay for any geotechnical studies done by residents?

The Municipality is making its own inquiries and it should not be assumed that it will pay for professionals engaged by others.