

Canmore flood management plans questioned

By Colette Derworiz, Calgary Herald, February 12, 2014

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CANMORE - Town of Canmore officials have been given a rough ride from experts attending a scientific workshop examining last June's floods in Western Canada.

The Changing Cold Regions Network, a research group made up of more than 50 university and government scientists, held a two-day meeting on extreme weather and hydrology in Canmore.

On Tuesday, town officials gave a presentation on their response to the flood and its impact on the town.

"Though the 2013 disaster has been a huge impact on the community ... the result could have been much worse," Andy Esarte, Canmore's manager of engineering, told workshop participants.

"On June 20, when we began to feel that there was a possibility that not only Cougar Creek would stay within its banks, but that we would get through without any serious injury or death, our attention immediately shifted to improving our understanding of our mountain creeks and to mitigate against this newly recognized threat."

In response, the town dedicated \$14 million for flood mitigation that includes rechanneling Cougar Creek to prevent erosion, building a debris net to catch material upstream and looking at an early warning system that could help alert the town to future debris floods.

Water experts peppered officials with questions and warned the town not to get in over its head by trying to predict future events.

"Canada itself isn't big enough to do some of this," said John Pomeroy, a University of Saskatchewan hydrologist who owns a home in Canmore. "I am not discounting the tremendous talent we have in the town, in its consultants and in its universities.

"The scope of the effort that's possible - as much as we have - is very, very limited so I would encourage Canmore to continue to bridge out, not to go inward, and for Alberta not to go inward but to look outward for solutions because we're in a very, very challenging period and we haven't even addressed the issues of changing climate and changing extremes."

Others, including a provincial official, have also questioned Canmore's ability to manage such a system.

"I don't know if the Town of Canmore has the capacity to have that much demand put on them," Colleen Walford, open water river forecaster with Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development, said in an interview earlier Tuesday. "So those discussions will occur as required."

Esarte suggested the town is simply trying to get additional information to better prepare for future events.

"We're not trying to predict weather and certainly we're not trying to predict stream flows," he said. "We're trying to take data that is commercially available and use it in a relatively straightforward way to indicate the probability of something happening."

Esarte said the likelihood of another debris flood is high.

Research from experts hired by the town has already shown there could be floods even larger than the 2013 event. In addition to debris floods, they've also determined there's a potential for massive landslides along the creek.

Both could ultimately lead to changes in land-use policy for development in some areas, he said.

Pomeroy acknowledged the town's challenges are immense, particularly considering the existing development along its creeks.

"If we had known this 100 years ago, we probably would have said, 'Let's not build here,'" he said. "It's too late for that and so now it's a situation of making it work."

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