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Canmore plans for early flood warning system sparks debate

By Colette Derworiz, Calgary Herald February 5, 2014

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Canmore - As crews work to shore up mountain creeks in the Bow Valley, Canmore is exploring an early warning system to deal with potential flooding.

On Tuesday, administrators recommended the system as part of the town's short-term mitigation measures after Cougar Creek turned into a raging torrent and damaged dozens of homes last June.

Mitigation work on the creek is already underway, with crews re-channelling it to prevent erosion. A project to build a debris net, which would capture up to 20,000 cubic meters of material upstream of Canmore, will also go out to tender in the coming week.

Officials said an early warning system - which would use real-time information on rainfall, snowpack and temperature to determine probability of another debris flood - would be another way to protect the town and its residents.

"The hope for future floods is that it gives us another piece of information to fit into the puzzle," said Andy Esarte, manager of engineering with the Town of Canmore. "It will allow us to make better decisions earlier.

"We could also communicate it to the public that there's a probability and so to use caution around the creeks and, perhaps, prepare for an emergency," he added.

The system could be funded through the existing \$14 million approved for flood mitigation on Cougar Creek and various others, although it will require the province's approval because it's outside the scope of the original project.

Council members signed off on the town looking for ways to fund the \$200,000 system, but there was a lot of debate about the proposal - with some suggesting more information was needed from experts before moving ahead.

At least one local expert suggested it's not a good idea for the town to start its own early warning system.

"I advised them not to go there," said John Pomeroy, a University of Saskatchewan hydrologist who owns a home in Canmore. "A town shouldn't be in the forecasting or prediction business.

"They don't have the technical capability or depth of knowledge to do it adequately."

Forecasting, he said, should be done at the highest levels - such as Environment Canada or Alberta Environment.

"It needs 24/7 operation and you have to be continuously assessing uncertainty," he said. "And you have to be able to verify and measure the reliability of the forecasts, and I didn't see any of that in place here."

Pomeroy said it could also lead to confusion with the warning systems already in place.

“Let’s say the province issues a forecast and a warning and Canmore doesn’t, so people don’t evacuate,” he said.
“Let’s say there’s an event coming and the province doesn’t issue a forecast, but Canmore does.

“It adds to the confusion in these events and that was already a problem in the last one.”

In addition, Pomeroy said it could create liability issues for the town if there’s a false alarm or no alarm when disaster hits.

“People, by knowing that an early warning system exists, will take faith in it and start to rely on it instead of their own judgment,” he said. “So if you create one, you’ve created the liability to get it right.”

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