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Life-giving water can be death to roadways

What is a road's worst enemy? Fully loaded transport trucks come to mind, but the answer could be more basic: water. This simple substance can erode solid rock over time, and your average asphalt street is a lot less durable.

BY NATIONAL POST APRIL 28, 2006

What is a road's worst enemy? Fully loaded transport trucks come to mind, but the answer could be more basic: water. This simple substance can erode solid rock over time, and your average asphalt street is a lot less durable.

A little bit of liquid seeping into a crack in the pavement can be ruthless when abetted by sub-zero temperatures. Once water freezes anywhere below the surface, the roadway starts to crack, and when your wheels pass over the weak spot, the damage is done. Voila -- you have a baby pothole.

Montreal has been making lots of babies, thanks to a combination of daunting northern weather and apparent dereliction of duty on the part of road repair crews.

Lately, water has been more dangerous than just turning your commute into a risky game of dodge the chuckhole. In Canada alone, vicious weather has been ripping roads asunder in Newfoundland or burying them (along with everything else) underneath Prairie floods.

We've long had to counter the wrath of our dear Mother Nature, and the possibility of irrevocable climate change hangs above our collective psyche -- despite an ongoing debate among legions of opposing scientists.

One might expect mountain passes to be washed out but somehow feel confident that the elements won't really threaten urban areas, aside from those roads that run along riverbanks and lake shores.

But in the suburbs of northwest Toronto, wayward water has brought major, unexpected disruptions to the way hundreds of thousands of people get around. Last summer, a heavy rainstorm rolled through southern Ontario carrying unexpected precipitation. There was flooding across Canada's biggest city, reminding everyone that you don't need a hurricane to cause a big mess.

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Most of the runoff made it safely into rivers and sewers, but one ravine became so saturated that a major four-lane bridge was swept away like a kid's sand castle. It wasn't until Finch Avenue was cut -- not far from Highway 400 -- that many were reminded how crucial an arterial it was.

Suddenly, a large quadrant of the metropolis faced months and months without a major east-west link. There are few alternatives to Finch, which is not only a vital traffic conduit but busy transit route as well. To see how the road washed away, go to <http://jane-finch.com> and click on "Pictures."

After continuous work, city engineers finally brought two lanes into service in January. Less than a month later, underground water movement opened up a nearby sinkhole in the worst place possible -- a major intersection. Barely five kilometres from the Finch washout, the busy suburban junction of Jane Street and Highway 7 was knocked out of service.

Citing "unusual ground water conditions," municipal officials revealed that not only was the roadway unsafe but the damage would require complete replacement of a water main, sanitary and storm sewers and associated infrastructure.

Some reports pointed to the presence of a river or creek running beneath this busy intersection, buried by progress and forgotten. Toronto is traversed by many waterways, the less prominent of them being channelled into underground sewers to make way for roads and homes.

Errant water took out another crucial thoroughfare this week, this time when a 50-year-old water main burst underneath Sheppard Avenue West, near Bathurst Street. All four lanes are out of commission indefinitely -- and once again on a street that has few nearby alternatives.

The business owners around Jane and 7 are now desperately waiting for the intersection to be ready "mid-May." Check on progress at www.region.york.on.ca. As for Finch, the full four lanes are expected back "in late May."

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