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Ice storm shows service gaps in rural, urban Dufferin County

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Dufferin County has requested assistance through the Municipal Ice Storm Assistance Program.

The provincial government program was announced in June on the heels of a storm earlier in the year that shut down much of the province.

It's assistance to municipalities in covering operating costs beyond regular budgets, needed to protect public health, safety, or access to essential services. It's to help cover capital costs for repairing public infrastructure or property.

The application deadline is Oct. 31.

Municipalities within the umbrella of Dufferin County experienced a prolonged severe ice storm at the end of March. The storm mauled much of the county's infrastructure, stretched emergency services, and tormented residents with havoc wrought by downed trees, widespread power outages, and disrupted communication.

Households, urban and rural alike, experienced outages over multiple days, and vulnerable populations faced heightened risks.

?Despite these challenges, the response highlighted the strength and adaptability of the county and its communities,? according to a staff report to Dufferin County council. ?Inter-agency coordination, mutual aid between municipalities, and strong volunteer engagement ensured critical supports were provided.?

Those supports included wellness checks, the opening of warming centres, and the distribution of resources.

?Residents demonstrated resilience and solidarity, sharing resources, assisting neighbors, and taking proactive measures to protect homes and property,? according to the report.

The storm highlighted things municipalities and the upper tier need to improve to better gear up for the next weather event.

Backup power supplies, better rural communication networks, and public education on generator safety, debris management, and emergency preparedness are measures that need to be considered.

Lessons learned from this event will inform future planning, guiding investments in infrastructure modernization, enhanced emergency management strategies, expanded public education, and continued support for community resilience initiatives.

From the county's after-action report: ?By building on these experiences, Dufferin County is better positioned to protect residents, support vulnerable populations, and respond effectively to future severe weather events.?

Councillor Darren White, the mayor in Melancthon, said the after-action report into the March ice storm contains many broad strokes when he'd like to have seen some finer-pointed items. He appreciates the recommendations, but he feels they're wide-ranging.

?As much as we talk about climate change and increasing storms and more emergencies and whatnot, what council has failed to do is put appropriate people into the emergency management office enough that we can actually build out those emergencies and try to fix them instead of constantly being reactive, which is what we always seem to do,? White said.

He said the county provides some services to municipalities. Other services, such as waste collection, are farmed out to contractors who may have rigid rules for delivering the service uniformly throughout the county.

Take waste collection, as an example.

The northern parts of the county were hit more severely by the ice storm than the southern centres. But residents at both ends had to work within the same parameters for collecting and bundling waste.

In southern Dufferin, White offered, as an example, that more residents may have had fewer, smaller fallen trees to bundle into lengths of three feet and no more than 40 pounds. North Dufferin residents in more rural areas may have had larger trees to contend with for collection.

Those larger trees had to be broken down and bundled in the same three-foot lengths as the southern smaller branches.

?That's just totally ridiculous,? White said. ?There's no other way to say it.?

The county needs to work with contractors to make such programs flexible, he said.

?Something like this is going to happen again,? he said. ?Maybe not this year. Maybe two years from now. Maybe three years from now. There'll be people still trying to bundle their waste to put out into the yard.?