



Flood protection consultant Tamsin Lyle speaks at the annual general meeting Friday for the Okanagan Basin Water Board. Photo: Barry Gerding/Black Press

Facing the Okanagan's future flooding issues

Valley's water future focus of AGM for Okanagan Basin Water Board

BARRY GERDING / Aug. 10, 2018 1:20 p.m. / LOCAL NEWS / NEWS



The Okanagan Valley communities need a major change of attitude in how to prepare for a future that will see more extreme weather occurrences that result in flooding, says a leader in flood management planning in Canada.

Tamsin Lyle, the principal of Ebbwater Consulting, said historically we have chosen to avoid discussions about flooding challenges and the need to make difficult decisions and trade-offs.

But Lyle said the impact of climate change, causing extreme weather changes that translate into flooding and wildfires beyond what we've seen in the past 100 years, is forcing us to face those realities at a civic government level, most notably in planning for development on floodplain areas that places infrastructure and people in harm's way.

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"Historically, we have tried to avoid these difficult conversations and decisions, opting instead to fight floods—by stopping the water, by building walls, by pushing the problem away," said Lyle.

"With a changing climate, and more extreme weather and flood events, we can't continue to build our way out of the problem. We have an opportunity to do things differently, and to do them better—to learn to live with the water rather than fighting against it."

Lyle was one of the keynote speakers at the annual general meeting of the Okanagan Basin Water Board held Friday at the Innovation Centre in Kelowna.

Lyle said the impact of flooding is not limited to just those who are directly impacted, as the recovery cost for damages affects the pocketbook of all Canadian taxpayers.

"Floods are something that affects everyone. Flood damages cost Canadian taxpayers hundreds of million of dollars a year, disrupt businesses and damage the environment and cultural assets. This is something that Okanagan residents know intimately. Recent flooding, and the stress and toll associated with it, will be remembered by those directly affected for the rest of their lives. Limiting future impacts is something we should all care about."

Lyle said floodplain development is a provincial concern, as more than 675,000 people and more than 180,000 buildings currently exist in floodplain areas.

"We have seen that impact on the Lower Mainland of increasing exposure to risk of population and business growth on floodplains, and also here in the Okanagan. Mission Creek is identified as a floodplain but there are many others susceptible to flooding," she said.

Lyle said the future direction to address flooding has to reside in less reliance on engineers offering technical solutions based on limited weather and flooding water level research data that currently exists, different building practices to address potential flood concerns, and more discussion about community values in flood control strategy.

Brian Symonds, former director of water stewardship of Okanagan Lake with the environment ministry, also spoke at the annual general meeting, echoing Lyle's sentiments as the impacts of climate change become more readily apparent.

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"We are going to see more of the extreme weather conditions we have seen here in the Okanagan these past two years and we have to consider the flooding consequences, the economic, environment and social impacts," he said.

Symonds said future flooding issues and how they are addressed now rest at the civic government level, in particular future and existing floodplain development management, such as building homes elevated above the ground and increasing riparian setbacks from shorelines in high flooding hazard areas.

"You have to start planning for that now and face the future," Symonds said.

Anna Warwick Sears, executive director of the OBWB, said the annual general meeting theme "Preparing for the future" was chosen as it best describes the focus of the water board's work this year.

"I've been thinking and reading a lot about climate change, which is affecting the weather in the Okanagan and exacerbating the impacts to our communities. There is a lot of uncertainty about how the weather patterns will play out, but we know that we are going to have more extreme events—floods, fires and droughts.

"It's not too late to reduce the impacts of we take climate change seriously."

Much of the OBWB's work this past year has focused on helping communities develop drought plans, floodplain mapping and gaining a better understanding of environmental needs for water, she said.

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Work has also been done to research ground and surface water supplies and its interconnection in our valley, along with expansion and protection of wetlands to address flooding and promote improved water quality, she added.

"All of this work is intended to help our communities make better decisions to meet the challenges we are facing today and in the years ahead," Warwick Sears said.

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barry.gerding@blackpress.ca

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