

Businesses should plan for getting going again after a disaster

By Bill Rea

Municipalities are required to have emergency plans to be implemented in the event of a disaster. But how many businesses have such plans in place?

They should, because a business is part of a community, and the sooner both get back up and operating after a disaster, the better.

That was one of the points made recently at business continuity workshop on emergency preparedness in Nobleton.

“King Township is not immune to an emergency by any means, and with an ever-changing world, we constantly face threats and new threats daily,” commented King Fire Chief Bryan Burbidge.

Adam Tzarik, director of marketing and sales for Foley Restoration in Schomberg, said disasters can take many forms. Essentially, as far as a business is concerned, it’s anything that impacts on the ability to conduct business in a normal fashion.

Some are obviously disasters, while other such occurrences involve things that people might not think qualify.

Tzarik cited examples like the August 2005 flooding of the Don Valley Parkway, pointing out that resulted in some 15,000 insurance claims being made. A disaster could be a big fire, or an earthquake, and Tzarik assured the audience earthquakes do happen in southern Ontario. “One day, it could become worse,” he said.

There was also the massive power blackout in August 2003. Tzarik said a lot of store operators found out their alarm systems weren’t operating. Some of them had to sit in front of their stores all night.

A disaster for a business can be the result of sabotage

caused by disgruntled employees. Tzarik said employers should keep track of “who has access to what.”

Disasters can occur when construction crews cut things like phone lines. “You can all of a sudden be cut off,” he remarked.

Proper emergency preparedness can make a company “more disaster resilient,” observed Stephen Elliott, a field officer of the GTA sector of Emergency Management Ontario.

He added such plans are useful in the home too.

Emergency preparedness became a priority in Ontario after the massive ice storm in eastern Ontario and Quebec in 1998, and that was magnified in light of the 9-11 terrorist attacks. The Province got into high gear, calling on all municipalities and ministries to have plans to deal with disasters. Elliott said there is now a lot of sharing of information and knowledge.

He warned business people not to assume they will be able to do their emergency planning on the fly. He quipped that crises tend to happen when people are busy.

He also stated incidents happening some distance away can impact on King.

“We are interdependent, we are interconnected networks,” he remarked. “We can’t live in isolation any more.”

Elliott warned that global warming carries the threat of various weather events taking place in this area, like tornadoes, wild fires, droughts, etc.

He also pointed out that 40 per cent of the Canada’s population lives in Ontario, and 50 per cent of the chemicals manufactured in the country are here. On top of that, he said most municipalities have at least one chemical facility, and there are 21 nuclear reactors in Ontario. “They’re getting

old,” he said, although he agreed the technology they use is pretty good.

Other areas of possible concern in southern Ontario are roads and rail lines. There are accidents occurring all the time. He said trains leaving the tracks are getting more common, adding it’s been luck that it hasn’t yet happened in the middle of an urban area.

Infrastructure is getting old, Elliott said, adding part of the problem is municipal councils are anxious to keep taxes down, so lack of maintenance is becoming more of an issue.

Disasters are usually measured in terms of deaths or injuries, but they have other implications. Elliott pointed out the 9-11 attacks carried a cost of between \$30-and-\$70 billion, while Hurricane Katrina in 2005 cost around \$50 billion, and they’re still cleaning up. The ice storm of ‘98 cost about \$4.2 billion and the 2003 power outage ran up bills totalling about \$6 billion.

“These are not small crises,” he declared.

Elliott stressed the need for businesses to have plans in place. For one thing, it enables employees to now what to do so they can continue to deliver services.

Emergencies can occur in minutes, so the plans have to make sure the employees are looked after (this includes their families), as well as addressing the procedures for resuming business.

The employees are

important assets in emergencies, so their safety and ability to function is important.

The plans also has to address getting back into business and operating again. Elliott added it may not be necessary to do everything the business has done in the past, but it is important to be able to decide who and what are essential.

The needs of customers and suppliers have to be taken into account too. Elliott said a company can have the best plan in the world, but if it depends on an organization that doesn’t have one, “you’re dead in the water too.”

Plans also have to consider what other things might go wrong. A lot of tools that people depend on, like cell phones and blackberries, might not be available.

Being in a rural place like King doesn’t mean there’s protection from problems elsewhere. Elliott pointed out if something like a terrorist attack happens in Toronto, there will be a ripple effect in King because so many local residents commute.

Keeping these plans up to date is important too. He recalled a number of municipal officials reached for their emergency plans during the ice storm, and found they were so dated they were useless.

Plans should also consider that the main office

of a business might not be accessible during an emergency, so multiple locations have to be considered. “If I have to, I can work out of my vehicle,” Elliott said.

Recent events have helped increase awareness of the need to be prepared, and that has led to more sharing of information. “There’s a wealth of information out there,” he remarked.

Elliott pointed out that in the event of a major crisis, people responsible for first response will be busy with things other than getting businesses back in place. That means business operators might have to be ready to look after themselves for at least 72 hours.

Addressing the possibility of a pandemic, Elliott said it could be viewed as a “creeping enemy,” adding by the time the world health Organization says it’s here, it will be here.

Some of the steps that will have to come into play will be basic, such as remembering to wash one’s hands. “We can’t legislate personal hygiene,” he pointed out, adding it’s important to educate the workforce about this, because there will be no time when the crisis starts.

He also stressed the need

to be able to deal with staff absenteeism. If school close, then employees might have to take time to look after their kids.

Part of the plan will include developing a decision-making process, and making sure others in the organization know what it contains, in case someone else has to fill in for the people at the top.

Various assets of a company come into play at a time like this. Tzarik observed that goodwill is one of them, although it’s hard to measure. But it will be important for a company to come up with ways to retain their customers. He cited the example of Tim Hortons, saying that an outlet rebuilding from a fire can have a trailers set up to dispense goods in hours, thus keeping their clients happy.

It is reality, Tzarik said, that 43 per cent of businesses that suffer a major disaster never re-open, possibly because of the lost customers and revenue flow. And of the businesses that do re-open, he said 29 per cent of them are gone within two years, because they were not properly prepared, or they lost good employees.

“Unforeseen events do happen, and the real disaster is a failure to prepare for them,” he remarked.

Dino Camp at museum

The King Township Museum would like all its Heritage Campers to know that an exciting new camp is about to start.

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