

Christchurch 3 years after the earthquake...

Gord Hume...February, 2014

It was three years ago when Christchurch, New Zealand was devastated by a 6.3 level earthquake. It followed a previous large earthquake the year before, which had weakened much of the infrastructure of the city, but the one in February, 2011 did enormous damage.

185 were killed. The Central Business District (CBD) was locked down for a year and a half, and has just reopened. A recent visit to the city meant wandering past block and block of rubble and empty lots. It was an eerie experience, walking the downtown in the evening, seeing empty blocks and closed buildings. The locals have abandoned the downtown. Few shops and restaurants are open, and those close about 4:30pm.

This will be the largest insurance claim in history. The final totals are still not in because, shockingly, not all claims have yet been settled. The guesstimate now is \$5 billion. The total cost to rebuild Christchurch is now in the \$40-50 billion range, over the next fifty years.

Virtually their entire municipal infrastructure in the CBD was destroyed. Imagine if your city had to replace and repair all the water, sewer, electricity, street and traffic lights, and then inevitably the roads and sidewalks. The costs are enormous, and no one is completely sure where all the money will come from.

The disruption of human lives is still lingering. Everyone you meet has a story—how their house moved 10 inches, how families narrowly escaped death, how a pet survived. An estimated 10,000 homes are red-tagged and are uninhabitable, destined to be torn down. Block after block is a bleak wasteland, and you almost expect tumbleweeds to be blowing down the empty streets.

The Police Station was damaged and remains closed. City hall survived. University buildings were badly damaged. Many other civic properties were damaged beyond repair. Tram lines downtown have been closed for three years.

The bleak symbol that has struck most in this city of 365,000 (NZ's second largest city) is the lovely century-old cathedral that anchored the civic square in the heart of the CBD. The spire and front face was torn off, the rose windows shattered, and the structure crumbled in places. It sits open today, surrounded by a pretty fence and supported only by an ugly steel structure, while the Anglican diocese and heritage advocates argue in court about its future.

The downtown and the eastern suburbs were dramatically impacted; the western parts of the city including the airport were relatively unscathed. That is causing divisions today by residents, depending on where you live.

It is a stark reminder of how 10 seconds forever changed a city. Christchurch remains vulnerable to after-shocks and new quakes, and 'earthquake fatigue' has meant many residents left. It is a haven for skilled trades' people from many countries. Work seems slow. The business community has been reluctant to invest as there is so little traffic downtown.

Small pockets of progress are emerging. Some bright young entrepreneurs opened the "ReStart Mall", composed of truck container compartments that have been converted to shops and food outlets. Public art has sprung up in unlikely places, to provide some cheer. Locals continue to stay away from the downtown, however. Orange traffic cones direct traffic, and they change routes almost every day depending on construction needs.

It is sobering to contemplate the scope of this devastation. The city's plight has fallen off the world's radar screen. 300 police from Australia were sent in to help initially. Con men and crooks arrived shortly after, and sadly took advantage of unsuspecting homeowners.

While all Canadian communities have their own emergency plans in place, this was such a massive emergency that local services were overwhelmed. How would our cities respond in such circumstances?

It is hard not to feel emotional about the city's plight. I found myself almost angry at what I saw as the lack of progress, but that was tempered by the fact that it took them nearly two years just to demolish buildings in the CBD.

There is a growing sentiment among many locals that this is a rare opportunity for a long-established city to 'get a mulligan' in their urban planning. There is talk of a large eco-park, a sports precinct, an arts precinct. Some suggest limiting building heights to seven storeys. The city had ignored its river; now there is a thought to turn the CBD to face it. Some locals believe that in 20 years the city will be redone and can become an exemplary community.

There has not been as much public engagement on the new plans as I would have expected. Several of the previous City Council members got booted from office last fall, and the new council seems more oriented to public input.

It was a surreal experience one evening to sit, absolutely alone, in the main public square in the midst of a once-thriving city. No locals. No tourists. No buzz of traffic or chatter from residents on the streets. Just the sun setting on the open face of the cathedral as birds nested on the venerable beams that once supported the church roof, and closed, dark buildings surrounding the plaza remained silent.

A natural or man-made disaster can change a city in a heartbeat.

Municipal leaders have much responsibility.