

If it rains, Toronto Islands aim to be ready

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It's the first summer after the worst floods the Toronto Islands have ever experienced. Trees and fences remain uprooted, and bunches of worn-down sandbags still stand guard over the coastal waves.

But preparations have been underway for weeks to ensure that this year — and every year — rising waters won't bring Toronto's favourite summer destination to a complete halt.



Memories of last year's flooding on the Toronto Islands linger. Here, the sandbags on the beach are still in place

CARLOS OSORIO/Toronto Star

"It's been a tough, tough 12 months for us," Bill Beasley, owner of Centreville Amusement Park, told the Star. "We're still coming out of the woods. Hopefully there will be sunny days ahead." In the weeks leading up to the park's opening on Victoria Day weekend, Beasley, along with crews from the City of Toronto's Parks, Forestry and Recreation department and

the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, have been carrying out repairs and improvements to mitigate future flooding. According to Parks and Recreation spokesperson Jane Arbour, these include reinforcing the shores of Centre Island Beach and Ward's island; creating a three-foot-high by 400-foot-long land mass to protect Bayview Island; installing eight sump pumps complete with drainage tiles; and making available 15,000 sandbags and aqua dams, just in case. Last spring, Lake Ontario rose to 75.9 metres above sea level — the highest the islands have seen since 1918, when the first reliable measures of the lake were taken. Event spaces on the islands had to cancel a slew of weddings, with prospective brides and grooms scrambling to find new venues amid fully booked summer schedules. Island restaurants and services all took a hit as a result. For three months, the amusement park and all its amenities — the farm, the rides, the boats — became a ghost town.



Bill Beasley is preparing for more flooding on Toronto Islands, but is optimistic about the summer.
(BERNARD WEIL/TORONTO STAR)

Beasley recalled how a flood in the 1970s raised water levels over Centreville's train bridge. "The water receded by the end of June that year," he said. In 2017, the water didn't recede until late in the summer, prolonged by higher-than-normal inflow from the other great lakes due to significant rainfall across southern Ontario. "Never has the whole park been flooded," Beasley said. In the aftermath, Centreville Island reported a \$7.5 million loss in sales and more than \$3 million in damages. For the first time in its history, the amusement

park reported a loss in its books, somewhere in excess of \$1 million — a loss that led Beasley to put the park's iconic 110-year-old carousel up for sale last summer. The flooding cost the city \$8.45 million. The main issue for Beasley then was the cancellation of ferry services. "Centreville wasn't entirely underwater," he said. "We could've opened if people could have gotten there." Now, the ferries are up and running and TRCA and Parks and Recreation crews have upgraded all the docking facilities so the boats can continue to function in high water levels.



Rob Croft is trying to get ahead of preparing the Islands now, and there is a lot of work to be done.
(CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR)

"As long as the city can run the ferries, we'll be open," Beasley said. Ryan Bolton, a TRCA project manager, said he remembers getting the call about the floods and mobilizing some eight restoration crews, already working on projects across the city, right away. "As far as large scale flooding, this was a first time for many of the crew," he said. In total, Bolton oversaw the placement of 39,000 sandbags across the island. Several thousand stood at the beach — they were lined up on sand, parallel to the water's edge, barring the waves from coming further inland. Some, especially those placed in critical residential areas, are still there "just in case," Bolton said, "because these things are an unknown." Over the last few days, TRCA workers have been slowly lifting many of these sandbags away, and moving them to a work site on the Islands.



The farm on Centreville Island will be open this season but with limited access. Many of the animal cages were flooded and damaged beyond use last summer. (CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR)

“With the work we do, the goal is to always anticipate worse case scenarios,” Bolton said. “We can’t control mother nature and we don’t control the dance. It could happen again.” Last week, Rob Croft, the manager of Far Enough Farm, part of Centreville Amusement Park, was reinforcing the wooden fences, moving from paddock to paddock with a hammer and packet of nails. He started these repairs in March 2017, but when the showers started and ensuing floods began, his work had to stop. **“I would hammer a post in the earth barely a foot deep, only to be met by water,” he said. At one point, parts of the fence began to float. “I’m trying to get ahead of things right now,” Croft said. “There’s a lot of work to do.”** At the moment, the farm is eerily silent; the paddocks and pens are empty. The animals had to be moved to a temporary home at a city farm. Sections of the wooden-fenced perimeter of the farm remain destroyed — a jumble of splintered, broken boards. When Centreville opens on Friday, the farm will be partially open, with only the smaller animals being brought back. The cows and horses will be transported in June once their paddocks are restored.



Now, the ferries are up and running and TRCA and Parks and Recreation crews have upgraded all the docking facilities so the boats can continue to function in high water levels. (CARLOS ORIO/TORONTO STAR)

Ninety per cent of the park rides will be fully functional. The train will be closed as water damaged and twisted the mechanism that holds the train in place. It will soon be elevated by two to three feet — the repairs to the train ride and the remediation of the shore are the biggest expense, Beasley said. The swan docks and buffer boat won't be operational either, as the amusement park aims to elevate the docks — parts of which remain submerged. But, thanks to the residents of Toronto, Beasley said, the Centreville carousel will still be there. Coun. Paula Fletcher, who spearheaded the motion to save the carousel rode by generations, told the Star it has become "part and parcel of (Beasley's) contract with the city." "He's a waterfront operator," Fletcher said. "We took into account it was a terrible summer last year ... and said he can't sell (the carousel) if he wants to stay there."



The train around Centreville Island remains out of service after the waterlogged soil loosened and twisted the tracks last year.

(CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR)

In the aftermath of the floods, companies the amusement park owed money to for maintenance contracts chose to forgive their bills for the year. And the city helped with rent. Beasley is working on finalizing some minor concessions in his agreement with the city and making arrangements with banks, financiers and insurers. "Everybody has pulled together," he said. It had made him hopeful, this year, the sun will shine and people will come over.

"Anything can happen, you just have to roll with the punches," he said. "You can prepare for the worst, but can you really be prepared for the worst?"

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