

[Back to Article](#)

Mayor Ford's office kept in the dark on crumbling Gardiner Expressway

Published on Friday December 14, 2012

Robyn Doolittle

Urban Affairs Reporter

When a third [chunk of concrete plummeted off the Gardiner Expressway](#) this spring, making it apparent something was seriously wrong with the elevated highway, Mayor Rob Ford's office ordered an emergency meeting with top city staff and offered a blank cheque to get the situation under control.

Hundreds of documents obtained by the Star through freedom-of-information legislation offer a window into the panic that was unfolding at city hall during the early days of the crisis in May.

Emails show that while engineers and chipping crews were frantically working to identify and remove loose pieces deemed to be in "emergency" status, communications staff was distributing "key messages" designed to convince the public the nearly 60-year-old Gardiner Expressway was safe.

Amid [recent accusations](#) that city staff deliberately misled the public about the gravity of the situation, questions have been raised about how much the mayor's office knew — especially after it was revealed that a member of Ford's staff ordered a city spokesperson to craft talking points touting the highway's safety.



Mayor Rob Ford walks with Councillor Denzil Minnan-Wong (right) under the Gardiner Expressway as the two survey the work being done by crews to fix the falling debris on May 25, 2012.

CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR

MORE: [Bury the Gardiner to undo the mistakes of yesteryear](#)

Public works chair Denzil Minnan-Wong says that, based on what they were being told, he and the mayor's office had every reason to believe the expressway was safe. Documents released to the Star support his claim.

Neither Minnan-Wong nor the mayor's office appear to have been sent the damaging engineer memos. The documents suggest the administration was more or less told the same thing as the public: There's no cause for alarm, the situation is under control and concrete separating from a larger mass is not unusual.

Furthermore, documents show that despite these reassurances, the mayor's office ordered extra precautions for public safety.

MORE: [Fix the Gardiner Expressway or not, Toronto is in for a world of pain](#)

On May 23, the morning after a third piece had fallen in a two-week span, Ford's former policy director and current chief of staff, Mark Towhey, convened a meeting with staff in the mayor's boardroom.

Minnan-Wong, who was in the room, said Thursday that staff explicitly said, "You don't have anything to worry about ... we have it under control."

Regardless, Towhey made a series of demands.

All sidewalks, crosswalks and other "pedestrian-at-risk areas" should be inspected and made safe within four days, or be closed off. If a fourth chunk fell near one of these places before then, staff should look at closing all the areas immediately.

He questioned whether "overhead hazard" signs should be used until the review was complete and whether staff should create "temporary pedestrian crossings in safe areas."

Towhey also requested that the entire 7-kilometre underbelly be examined within three weeks or sooner.

By the end of day, Towhey demanded a full status update, a strategy for the next 48 hours, a list of deployed resources, information on additional

incidents, a contingency plan to manage traffic if the road needed to be closed, a communications strategy, and a process for police and all city staff to report back if they noticed suspicious concrete out on the road.

“There is political will to support staff’s efforts to procure the resources necessary to meet the aggressive time lines above, and to accelerate the rest of the already planned remedial work. Staff should advise the MO (mayor’s office) of any additional requirements necessary to expedite maintenance plans or if there is anything we can do to help move through obstacles,” Towhey wrote in a lengthy follow-up email.

“We would like to stretch our capabilities to get this done ASAP. If it is impossible, please let us know why today. If it is merely extremely difficult — let us know anything we can do politically to help expedite the process to achieve these timings. If you can do it faster — please do.”

Over the subsequent weeks, as city engineers reported back to staff via email that chunks of perilously loose concrete were dangling over playgrounds, parking lots and a GO station, the mayor’s office was not looped in on these communications.

In 2012, six pieces of concrete have plummeted from the embattled Gardiner Expressway. No injuries have been reported, although there has been damage to vehicles. But in addition to those six incidents, city engineers identified dozens and dozens of areas in need of “emergency” attention.

Engineers sent daily emails back to city hall warning that separated pieces might “fall any minute” and that parked cars were at risk of being hit. But it appears that the mayor’s office was only forwarded briefing notes related to chunks that actually fell, which did not paint an accurate picture of the situation.

It wasn’t until late June or early July that a high-level civil servant first told Towhey the situation was worse than believed.

Minnan-Wong said “we had no idea” how bad it was until recently.