

Landslide Nightmares

Based on personal testimonies
Presented by Pittsburgh Geological Society

It has rained for days. You wake up after a night of restless sleep and shuffle to the kitchen to put the coffee on. In addition to the rain, you hear cracking, whooshing, and snapping sounds and look out the window to see what is happening. You are stunned to find that your back yard has slipped down a long forested slope and that your swimming pool is torn apart, its twisted remains part way down the hill. You race outside to assess the damage and find that your driveway is pulled apart in stair-like chunks draped over the slope, your fence is upside down, and your foundation is exposed and cracked. You hear the continued snapping sounds of tree roots as the soil yields to gravity and water. Many trees are already on the ground. Many more are leaning. One is falling now, creaking and groaning toward the ground. You smell gas.

After 24 hours, the land that was once your back yard is sitting 200 feet down the slope, in a muddy heap at the bottom of a forested stream valley.

Welcome to the landslide nightmare, a nightmare that plays out all too often to unsuspecting property owners. It begins, simply enough, with the landslide – Step 0. Here's how it progresses.

Step 1

Your property value just went to zero. Your tax obligations did not.

Step 2

Your first call will probably be to your insurance only to find that they cannot help you because landslides are excluded from your homeowners insurance.

Step 3

Your second call will probably be to your local municipality. After much discussion (and several months), you will find that they cannot do anything because they cannot operate on private property.

Step 4

Your third call might be to FEMA or PEMA or the Army Corps of Engineers where you will find that these agencies are not geared to helping small numbers of homeowners, but are only activated for large-scale events.

Step 5

Your next call might be to your legislator who will be interested and sympathetic, but will not know exactly what to do.

Step 6

You will frantically search for who might be responsible.

Step 7

You begin getting advice and interest from a myriad of people including the press. This gets a lot of attention, but no solution. You begin to search on the Internet, frantically looking for help. This gives you a lot of information, but no real help.

Step 8

You then tell your story to maybe 1,000 or 10,000 more people

Step 9

When you have talked to everyone, and exhausted all possible sources of help, you grieve.

Step 10

After you grieve for a time, one of two things happens. You either give up in frustration and walk away from your investment or you get angry and determined.

Step 11

In your determination, you get educated. You find out about landsliding causes and effects. You find out about local governments, grants, legislators, insurance, local geology, and bunches of other things. You find out about the laws and policies that do not protect you. You find out about ordinances that are not upheld. You find out about developers who don't understand geology and don't respect land-use planning. You find out about statutes of limitations. You find out about information that is and is not available and in doing so, you may find out what you believe caused your personal catastrophe.

Step 12(a)

You file suit. After many, many, many years, and a great deal of money, the lawsuit will be over. You may or may not be satisfied.

Step 12(b)

You become actively involved in preventing the same misery from happening to other unsuspecting homeowners. You become involved in educational outreach regarding landslide prevention or you become politically charged to generate change. You create outreach programs to assist other landslide victims, ultimately giving them a united voice. You approach your legislators with ideas for change. You continue to plead your own case.

The conclusion

Some landslides are a result of natural forces; many are a result of man's interaction with the environment. Regardless of the cause, a landslide inflicts not only monetary damage but extreme anxiety, frustration, and suffering. Educating municipalities, developers, and property buyers about landslides is the first step in preventing the nightmare.

Don't be a victim. Ask questions before you buy a home.

For more information on landslides, and preventing them, contact a geologist or a geological society familiar with the subject. Pittsburgh Geological Society can be reached by contacting the website www.pittsburghgeologicalsociety.org.