

# OPINIONS

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### ■ GUEST COLUMN: ERIC RUSSO

# In this hillside slide-prone area, more prevention needed

This year's above-average precipitation reminds us that nature has the final say when it comes to the disposition of our hillsides.

With almost as much rainfall last April, May and June as this region receives in a year, many of our hillsides have not escaped the powerful forces of nature.

According to a July 3 article in *The Enquirer*, multiple counties throughout the Tristate have applied for federal disaster relief to offset the more than \$12 million of taxpayer money spent repairing public infrastructure damaged by slope failures. This figure does not reflect the millions of dollars in damages to private properties.

Even with this year's outbreak of landslides, it is astonishing that relatively few people appreciate, let alone recognize, this region's propensity for slope failures unless it has affected them directly.

The fact is, we live in one of the most landslide-susceptible areas of the country.



Eric Russo is executive director of the Hillside Trust.

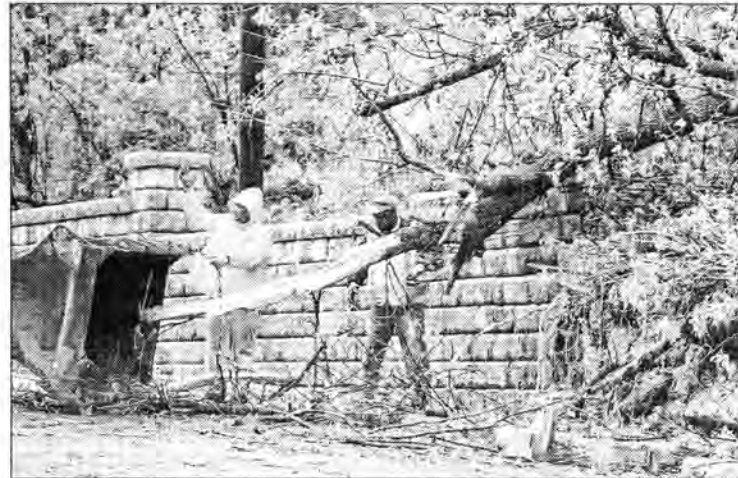
The combination of steep hillsides underlain with soft and highly erosion-prone shale contributes to this problem. Landslides likely existed prior to European arrival but became more pronounced when settlers clear-cut and quarried the vast majority of our hillsides for prized timber and limestone.

The situation has been amplified as modern growth inches onto hillsides once considered nearly impossible to develop, yet valued increasingly for their priceless views and/or virgin real estate.

Of the landslides I witnessed this spring, human alteration of the landscape was a contributing factor in many of the incidents.

Inappropriate cutting and filling of slopes, insufficient or ineffective routing of storm water and inappropriate (or poorly executed) design exacerbated an already problematic situation.

This underscores the fact that it costs considerably more to fix a landslide than it costs to prevent it



*The Enquirer*/Carrie Cochran

**City workers** clean debris from a mudslide that knocked out part of a retaining wall and power lines on Elberon Avenue in East Price Hill in May. This year's rainfalls have contributed to landslides.

with due diligence and forethought.

Despite the best intentions, the civil engineering and geotechnical sciences are not foolproof. Combined with the erratic nature of our hillsides, landslide damages can and do result from errors of

omission and commission, especially when record rainfall is part of the equation.

As a nonprofit, the Hillside Trust serves the interests of the region's hillsides through a three-part mission of research and education, land conservation and ad-

vocacy of responsible land use.

For years, it has encouraged local authorities to bolster, if not establish, hillside development regulations that effectively prevent unnecessary slope failures in the first place.

Over a generation ago, Cincinnati established a geotechnical office of engineering, and Hamilton County instituted an earthworks ordinance, all excellent proactive measures.

I believe more can be done across the region within the engineering and public administration professions to raise the bar on landslide prevention and public safety. Initiatives to implement higher standards of preliminary site investigations, and efforts to actively engage a key yet often overlooked collaborative partner, the real estate community, are excellent next steps.

I believe we are better served by acknowledging our landslide nature openly and directly, from which future policy can better prevent unnecessary property damage and save public dollars in the long run.