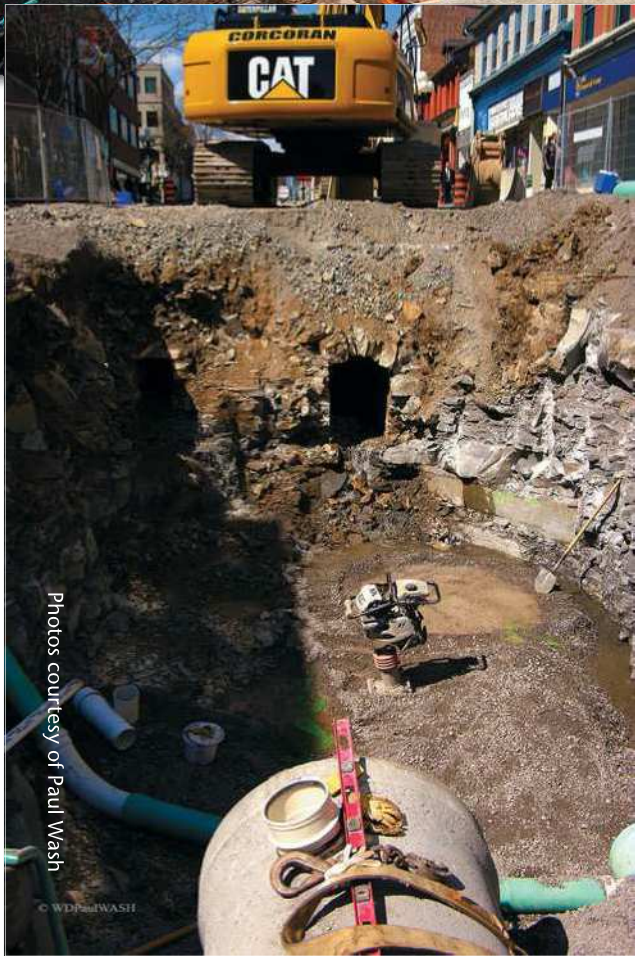




# A Dig with a Difference

Len Corcoran Excavating Finds Success by Focusing on People before Profits



Photos courtesy of Paul Wash

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By Lisa Gordon

In Ontario, they say there are two seasons: winter and construction. But in Kingston, Ont., there is a third season that is vitally important to local businesses — tourism season. According to Statistics Canada data, the South Eastern Ontario region, which includes Kingston, welcomed 7,925,800 visitors in 2011. Although people come year-round, there's no doubt that Canada Day signals the beginning of the tourism boom each year.

Merchants who operate in Kingston's downtown core — especially those on the city's main artery, Princess Street — do a booming business as tourists shop, eat and take in the summer sights. That's why, when the city realized its century-old stone box sewer system had to be replaced underneath the downtown core, shutting down for summertime construction was unthinkable.

## Big Dig, Part I

In 2010, the city initiated its "Big Dig" project, which replaced the old limestone box sewers and watermains underneath the lower two blocks of Princess Street, from the foot of Ontario Street to King Street, and on King between Princess and Brock Streets. Through an RFP process, a local firm, Len Corcoran Excavating Ltd., was selected to complete the work. Company president Dan Corcoran told *The Undergrunder* that the ambitious project was in fact a sewer separation.



Photo courtesy of Paul Wash



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“The old box system — which was more than a century old in some places — had been made from dry-laid limestone rocks, formed into a tunnel that was about 24 inches wide and as much as four feet high,” explained Corcoran. “It was a combination system, meaning that it handled storm water as well as sanitary water. In significant rainfall, the levels would go from four inches deep to four feet deep — and then much of it would have to be diverted into the lake, potentially creating a health hazard. It was a problem.”

The Big Dig began on March 1, 2010, and was slated to wrap up by

Canada Day that year, in order to lessen the impact of construction on downtown businesses. The \$4 million project was a success, with new pipes installed underground for water and sewage, as well as electrical upgrades. Above ground, the streetscape was vastly improved, from storefront to storefront, by the addition of new sidewalks, granite curbs, planters, benches and streetlights. Best of all, Len Corcoran Excavating was able to wrap up the work on time, with an astonishing lack of disruption to area merchants. So, what was the secret to a successful Big Dig? Corcoran said it all comes down to keeping people

informed, every step of the way. His eldest daughter, Stacey, was the face of the project and responsible for creating and implementing the communication plan.

“Communication 101 — the most basic of communication lessons — that is the key,” Corcoran explained. “Business people must make decisions that affect their business on a daily basis. If they are aware of what is happening and have a chance to plan, it becomes extremely uneventful. Communication 101, sharing information with everybody regularly, is a lesson we learned. It paid off.”

### Big Dig II, the Sequel

The lessons learned by Len Corcoran Excavating during the first part of the Big Dig became invaluable when the firm was selected to complete the \$6.2 million second phase of reconstruction, an even bigger project that included two-and-a-half blocks of Princess Street and four blocks of side streets connecting to Princess. Originally planned as a two-year job, the schedule was accelerated, with construction beginning in late February 2013. By Canada Day, said the city, Princess Street needed to be open for the peak tourism season.

“Part II was a little bit more of an ambitious schedule in terms of what the city wanted to get done,” said Corcoran. “The project involved replacing the combination sewer with a new storm sewer and a new sanitary sewer, and replacing the existing watermain with a new one, and new services from the mains to the buildings.”

In order to replace a watermain, it’s necessary to install a temporary overland water delivery system. In February, in Kingston, that wasn’t a task for the faint of heart. Luckily, the winter was milder, without the bitter early March cold that is typical for the city. “We buried the pipes a bit below the surface so they wouldn’t freeze; we insulated them, and we attached electric heat trace on them as well. We needed as much time as possible,” explained Corcoran.

Public safety in a project of this size is paramount. In its RFP, Len Corcoran Excavating had committed to maintaining a 1.8-metre wide pedestrian walkway on both sides of the street at all times. Corcoran explained that since the project scope was once again from building face to building face, one of the early tasks was to make a trench into each place of business, so pipes could be replaced. "Then, we put a new sidewalk over top, so people had somewhere to walk. Normally, you'd put the main down the street and then do the services, but in this case we installed the service lines and connected them to the temporary overland water lines. The sewer lines were left temporarily connected to the old system."

The perimeter of the work zone was enclosed, with gates at either end allowing access to trucks and other equipment. "We had to open and close the gates to admit trucks each time. It was a very complex process," said Corcoran, who employed up to 45 supervisors, equipment operators, pipe layers, and general labourers on the site of Big Dig II. In addition to the workers, there were also 12 to 15 public relations staff members on site at any given time. Their sole function was to act as "meeters and greeters," shepherding members of the public safely from A to B.

"We practiced recognizing a puzzled look," laughed Corcoran. "A little old lady would come up to the corner that she's been coming to for 30 years, and it would look totally different. We had people trained to recognize that she needed help, and we'd help her to where she wanted to go."

Indeed, the meeters and greeters did their job so well that Corcoran and the city received many positive comments from a grateful public.

### Communication Is Key

Len Corcoran Excavating had about three months to plan for Big Dig II. When work began, there were three levels of supervisory staff on site: a "big picture" manager, a manager in charge of sewer and waterworks, and a communications manager. According

to Corcoran, this last position filled a critical role as the project unfolded.

"Adam Metcalfe was the communications manager. He'd go to the businesses on a daily basis to let them know how they would be affected by the construction each day. If one of them had a delivery coming in, our PR people would form a human convoy and schlep the boxes up to the business."

Metcalfe partnered with the city's communications manager, Derek Ochej. The two would attend weekly site meetings and then update the downtown business association on what to expect during the coming week. Metcalfe also recorded "Big Dig Updates" for a local radio station's morning show.

All of these combined efforts paid off. Although Kingston merchants suffered through the inconveniences of construction, they were prepared because they knew what to expect. Many of them made the best of it, running "Big Dig Deal" promotions to keep the customers coming in. Corcoran said they also brought drinks and snacks to site workers — although these impromptu breaks caused delays, they were also a barometer that indicated how well the project was going.

Big Dig II was completed on time and on budget, with Princess Street open for traffic on Canada Day 2013. There is still some minor work to be done on side streets, all of which will be wrapped up by early spring 2014. For Corcoran, the well-oiled communication machine was the key to the project's great success.

"I was just so fortunate to have a great bunch of staff who really got it — they understood why it needed to unfold like this," he said.

### People Before Profit

Len Corcoran Excavating Ltd. was founded by Corcoran's hard-working father, Len, in 1962. From the time Corcoran was 6 years old, his father involved him in the family business. Many after-school hours were spent helping at the office, along with weekend shifts as he got a bit older. After a misspent year in a university



Photo courtesy of Paul Wash

engineering program, Len told his son to "give up that university stuff, and I'll show you how to make a dollar. In three more years, you'll be able to hire all the engineers you want."

It proved to be wise advice. Corcoran joined the company full-time in 1976, when there were only nine people on staff. This year, the employee roster peaked at 90.

"There's a saying my dad had: 'people before profit.' That's an axiom we've lived by," he said. "Our success on Princess Street in Big Dig I and II has had everything to do with people. In this business, we're all basically the same — we buy pipes, and we all have trucks and gravel and excavators. The only real variable is people. If you're fortunate enough to round up really great people, the profit will come. I think my dad [who passed away in 1999] would be tremendously proud to read all of the nice articles in the paper about the work we've done." ■

*Len Corcoran Excavating has been a member of the Ontario Sewer & Watermain Construction Association (OSWCA) since 1998. Dan Corcoran represents Kingston-area members at association meetings in Toronto. He said his participation has illustrated that, "We all have the same problems, but just in different parts of the province. A lot of times we are isolated in Kingston, so it's a good opportunity to connect with things that are happening at the provincial level."*