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‘Why can’t they find a home for the soil?’: Contractors agree Toronto’s dirt policy is a mess



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Tyler Anderson/National Post file Observers and industry agree: the soil system makes no sense. The province views excavated soil as a problem; contractors scurry around, furtively hauling earth to landfills, where it does not belong.

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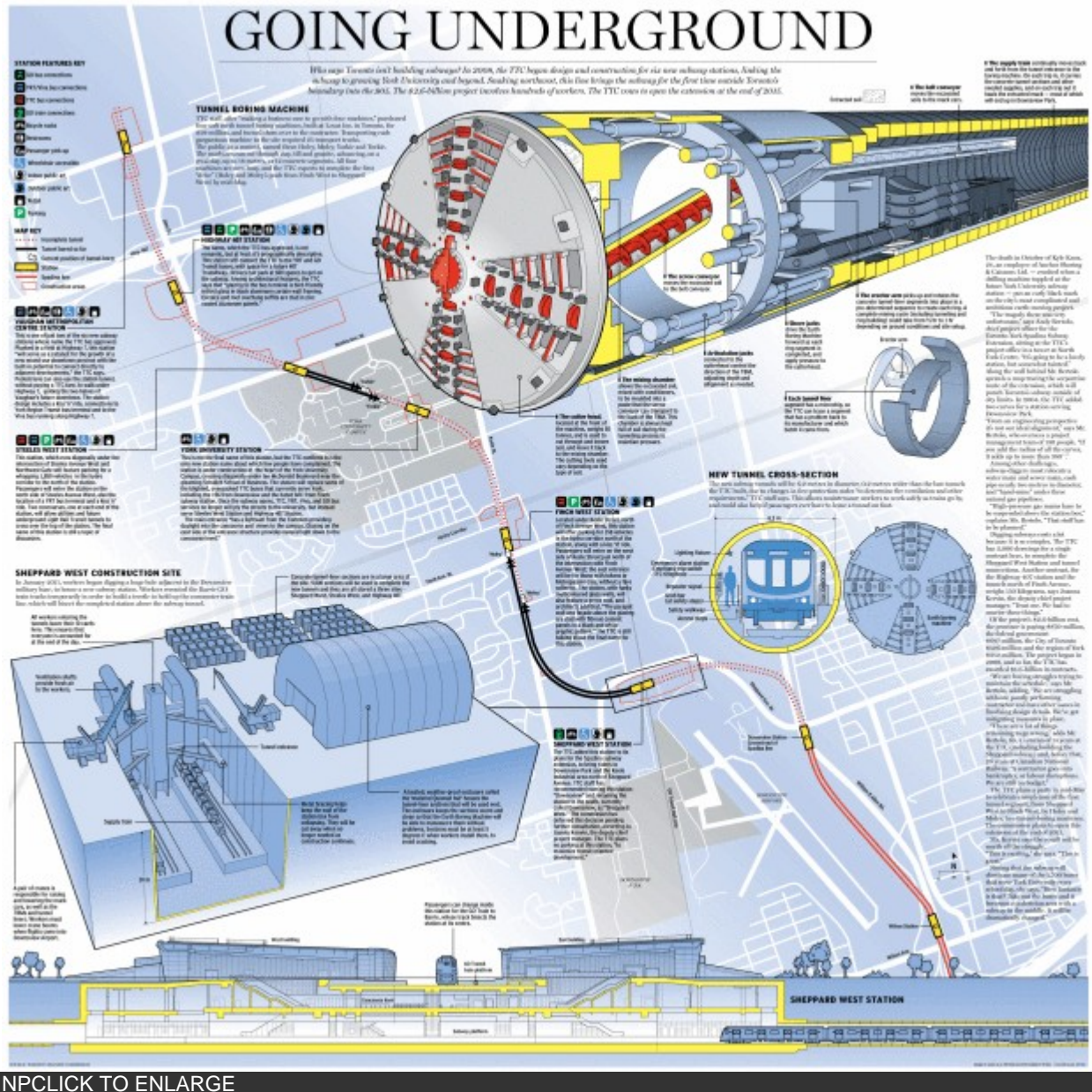
Workers are digging a lot of tunnels in Toronto this summer.

Early in June, workers fired up twin tunnel-boring machines, christened Dennis and Lea, to begin cutting through glacial till for the Eglinton Crosstown light-rail train. Four more borers are completing tunnels to bring Toronto's subway 8.4 kilometres northwest to York Region. Backhoes are carving a new tunnel under York Street for a second connection between Union Station and the city's PATH network. And crews are digging a 200-metre foot traffic tunnel under Lake Ontario to Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport.

All this digging yields several Rogers Centres worth of earth. But where is all the dirt going?

This seems a simple question to answer. Strangely, it is not.

The TTC directed the earth from previous subway projects to expand the port lands and build the Leslie Street Spit. Today, Metrolinx and the TTC have no idea where soil from their projects will come to rest. A reporter's three-week search for huge piles of dirt yielded some of the earth, but not all; sub-contractors are strangely furtive and cagey, keeping their dirty secrets to themselves.



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"The dirt guys are very secretive about what they do," says Tom Sims, senior project manager at Walsh Construction, contracted by the TTC to dig out Steeles West station on the Toronto-York Spadina Subway Extension. "If they find a location that is paying for dirt, they don't want their competitor to know where that is."

Observers and industry agree: the system makes no sense. The province views excavated soil as a problem; contractors scurry around, furtively hauling earth to landfills, where it does not belong.

A Dutch soil expert visiting Toronto this week advocates reuse, and points to Rotterdam, whose city-owned “soil bank,” matching companies digging dirt with those who need it. The Dutch system keeps thousands of trucks off the road and saves millions of euros a year.

The dirt guys are very secretive about what they do

Contractors agree that our dirt policy is a mess. “We are trying to bring it to their attention that the management of earth is an important thing, but there seems to be little regard at the design stage,” says Regan Cox of Mulmur Aggregates in Erin, Ont., a destination for “tunnel muck” from the Eglinton Crosstown LRT. “It’s been in design for three years — why can’t they find a home for the soil? We find it more than burdensome and risky to always be weighted down at the contractor stage.”

Sixty years ago, we didn’t have these hangups. For Toronto’s first subway from Union Station to Eglinton Avenue, between 1949 and 1954 workers cut 1.3 million cubic metres of soil from beneath Yonge Street — about two Royal York Hotels worth. Trucks hauled the soil east and dumped it in Lake Ontario, expanding the port and creating Ashbridges Bay Park. Trucks used earth from the Bloor subway line and the Sheppard subway to build the five-kilometre Leslie Street Spit.



Colin O'Connor for National Post/Metrolinx President and CEO Bruce McCuaig addresses the media during a press conference at the construction site of the Eglinton Cross Town LRT line near Black Creek Drive in Toronto on June 5, 2013.

Where does the dirt go now? On June 5 at the tunnel-boring machine launch for the Eglinton Crosstown, Bruce McCuaig, chief executive of Metrolinx, said the soil would go “mostly to the north and west in Peel Region. It is all good clean fill.”

DIGGING UP DIRT

CURRENT TORONTO EXCAVATION PROJECTS

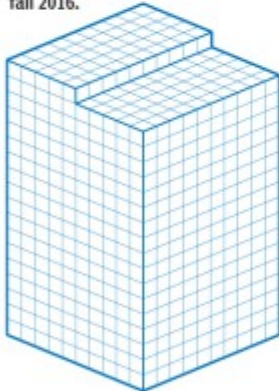


TOTAL SOIL TO BE EXCAVATED PER PROJECT

= 1,000 CUBIC METRES OF EXCAVATED SOIL, OR APPROXIMATELY 50 DUMP TRUCKS

1. Toronto-York Spadina Subway Extension:

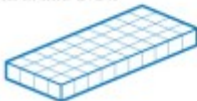
A new subway from current terminus at Downsview to new terminus at Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, a \$2.6-billion job to go 8.6 kilometres, will open in fall 2016.



Soil excavation: 1,750,000 m³
Dump trucks: 87,500

4. Toronto Port Authority:

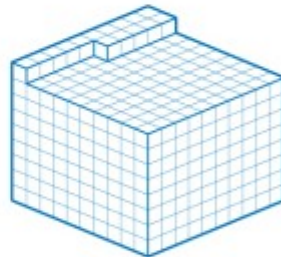
A \$82.5-million pedestrian tunnel at the foot of Bathurst Street, going underneath the Western Channel to the Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport. 190 metre-long tunnel 6m X 10 m, 2 shafts. Scheduled to open in mid-2014.



Soil excavation: 40,000 m³
Dump trucks: 2,000

2. Eglinton Crosstown LRT:

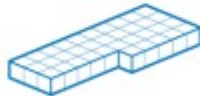
\$5.2-Billion project, includes a 10-kilometre tunnel from Keele Street to Laird Avenue. Scheduled to open in 2020.



Soil excavation*: 815,000 m³
Dump trucks: 40,750

3. Midtown utility tunnel:

Hydro One Networks) 2.5 km, 3m diameter.



Soil excavation: 35,000 m³
Dump trucks: 1,750

5. Northwest PATH connection:

City of Toronto digging a \$62.5-million pedestrian tunnel connecting the PATH underground walkway network to the northwest corner of Union Station.



Soil excavation: 700 m³
Dump trucks: 35

* Soil excavation is for the west tunnel from Black Creek to Yonge. Information for the rest of the tunnel is unavailable

SOURCE: TECHNICORE UNDERGROUND INC., TORONTO TRANSIT COMMISSION, TORONTO PORT AUTHORITY

JONATHAN RIVAIT / NATIONAL POST

Later, a Metrolinx spokesperson said the Crosstown soil would not go to Peel but to Technicore Underground in East Gwillimbury. When a reporter visited Technicore, a woman gave out another address for the soil: 5338 Wellington Road 125, Erin. This is the address of Mulmur Aggregates.

“It’s going to more than one spot,” says Mr. Cox at Mulmur Aggregates, about 60 kilometres northwest of the Eglinton Crosstown tunnel shaft. “We hope to be able to reuse some of this as fill or as granular. It may have to be benefacted or blended.”

Where is the TTC putting 1.75 million cubic metres of earth (about 60,000 dump truck loads) for the subway extension to Vaughan? Johanna Kervin, deputy manager of the project, concedes, “We have more dirt than we know what to do with.”

Provided her contractors comply with Ontario law, they can take it where they want, she adds. Where is that? The TTC provided the *National Post* a list of five subway extension contractors. All five said they subcontract the hauling; only one firm, Aecon, revealed final resting places. Among them: “secure landfills” in Hamilton and Erin; Blind Line in Dufferin, Veteran’s Way in Orangeville; Amaranth, on Highway 9, Port Hope, Waterloo, Simcoe and Alliston.

The TTC contracted OHL/FCC, a Spanish conglomerate, to excavate the “station box” for its York University and Highway 407 subway stations, as well as its “northern tunnels.”

To haul away the earth, OHL/FCC subcontracted dumptruck companies including B. Gottardo Excavation Company, Judge Haulage and C & A Fill Services. Some earth is heading to reuse: for example, C & A Full Services is hauling earth to the Township of New Tecumseth for site grading for new housing development. However, most of the soil will go to landfills outside Toronto.

We have more dirt than we know what to do with

A reporter at 2 p.m. Wednesday trailed a Judge Haulage dumptruck from the rapidly growing hole for the York University subway station. It wasn’t going far. The truck rumbled east on York Boulevard, north on Keele Street, west on Steeles Avenue and north on Jane Street, dumping its load on a mountain growing beside the future Highway 407 subway station. More trucks arrived, about one every five minutes.

“We are helping them out, taking 100 trucks a day,” explains Enrique Arribas, a Spaniard who is quality manager for OHL/FCC. “The material is very wet and they are working 24 hours a day.” Pointing to the huge pile of dirt, he says, “We are trying to build the highest mountain in Ontario.” Trucks will later haul the dirt away, he adds; he won’t say to where.



Matthew Sherwood for National PostDirt from the excavation of the Toronto-York Spadina subway extension is piled at the northern edge of York University's Keele Street campus in Toronto on Tuesday, June 18, 2013.

The environmental paperwork frustrates him. Before moving to Toronto, Mr. Arribas built a highway overpass in Mexico City. On four occasions he arrived at work to find a dead body dumped at his job site. “The first time I vomited,” he says. “By the third time I just shrugged and said, ‘Call the police.’ ” In Canada the challenge is different, he says: daunting stacks of soil management paperwork. Europe has a much more common-sense approach.

“In Spain, we reuse the soil,” says Mr. Enriques — mainly for berms and sound barriers. “We don’t have endless environmental regulations like you do in Canada.”

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Occasionally common sense breaks through: Chack Hundal of Gobind, a trucking company working near the future Steeles West station, says his firm hauls subway soil to the Holland Marsh. When a reporter visited he found bulldozers and backhoes toiling on a massive project to move the canal about 100 metres to the north of Canal Road.

Chris MacDonald, a bulldozer operator, said trucks dumped 200 loads of shale from Toronto here last week, to build berms and dykes.

On Monday, the Kingdom of the Netherlands flew Co Molenaar, a government expert in soil management, to Toronto. Mr. Molenaar, a tall smiling man with disarming round-frame glasses, met with officials in Toronto, Peel Region and Waterloo, to sell the Dutch system of maximizing soil reuse.

“Soil is sexy,” says Mr. Molenaar. “You earn money from it. If you look at the contribution of soil to our society, for food production, resources and building, it is a main contributor to everything we do.”



PETER KUITENBROUWER/NATIONAL POST Co Molenaar is a government expert in soil management from the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Rotterdam’s non-profit, city-owned soil bank is a busy spot, turning over 700,000 cubic metres of soil each year. Because the city knows which projects are planned (information that developers often share only with the city) the soil bank can match soil supply and demand. “A lot of projects become cheaper,” says Mr. Molenaar.

Mr. Molenaar suggests Ontario forbid hauling reusable soil to landfills, as is policy in the Netherlands — and in Quebec. Dutch companies can help “wash” contaminated soil, he adds. “The ministry of environment of Ontario have to face that if they don’t change their policy, all their ideas of sustainability won’t work.”

Gary Benner at Technicore Underground is enthusiastic about a soil bank.

“That makes so much sense I can’t believe that nobody has thought about it before,” he says. “Just matching up [people who dig up dirt with those who need it] would take 10,000 trucks off the road in a year, with savings in fuel and wear and tear. The regulations need a serious review. It’s a huge issue.”

Last year Councillor Doug Ford, a man of big ideas, [suggested using excavated soil to build a lollipop-shaped island](#) jutting out into Lake Ontario, on which we could plop an NFL stadium. He calls it “pulling a Dubai.” The councillor concedes that his idea is “way out there,” even so, such creative reuse of our precious soil sure beats trucking it out of town to the dump.

National Post

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