

This guy can pick up anything

Bob Chabot's mobile mega-magnet is making the highways safe for your tires.

BY TRALEE PEARCE
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The top highway-clearing outfit in the Greater Toronto Area has a new weapon for fighting post-accident grime. And your tires may thank them for it.

In addition to trucks that can rinse off roads with thousands of gallons of water and trucks that can sweep away debris, North York's Centennial Sweeping, now has a truck fitted with a 1,000-kilogram electromagnet to pick up and remove pieces of metal, nails, and other potentially tire-popping detritus that can hit the road and close roads for hours after an accident. They built the behemoth themselves.

Centennial owner Bob Chabot says he was inspired to invent the new truck after an accident last November on Highway 407

that spilled sharp bits of machine-stamping metal. There was so much metal debris, his cleaning efforts - and use of the highway - were backed up for eight hours.

"I said to myself, 'There has to be a better way'," he says, showing off the month-old machine that has yet to be sent on its maiden job. "This will be more efficient."

Ontario Provincial Police Sergeant Cam Wooley recalls that accident and has seen a test of the new magnetic sweeper. "This machine would have cut the time in half," he says. "It was very labour intensive. And every minute we wait means there's potential for a secondary collision."

In their on-site workshop, Mr. Chabot and his employees designed the monster picker-upper with new and used parts, most importantly the \$30,000 used magnet.



Photo: Fernando Morales

Mr. Chabot shows off his new magnetic sweeper, which picks up everything from crowbars to bumpers.

"I have some good guys - we're all engineers, we just don't have the rings."

Sgt. Wooley says he has seen other trucks with magnets, but they are fitted on trucks built on smaller chassis and have lower capacities. He hasn't seen anything like Mr. Chabot's baby. "This can pick up things others can't; parts of brake drums, bumpers, and springs," he says.

From the inside of the cab, the truck looks fairly standard, except for a screen hooked up to a camera monitoring the back of the truck. But Mr. Chabot figures he has spent about \$75,000 to customize the white and yellow "cab-forward" Ford truck. He added a "crash cushion", hydraulics and a sweeper. And to act as a counterweight to the electromagnet, he has to put a 1,800 kilogram block of

cement in the back. The retrofitted truck may be a beast, but as Mr. Chabot demonstrates its powers in the Centennial parking lot, it looks more like an enormous toy, adorned with a huge orange decal reading Magnetic Sweeper. As he chucks big hunks of metal, nails and crowbars under the front of the truck, they barely touch the ground before bouncing up and sticking to the canary-yellow magnet.

Then, like a giddy vacuum salesman, he jumps on board and releases the magnet, sending the rusty bits to the ground. He backs up over them and picks them up, then drops them to repeat the drill.

It actually looks like it might not be such a grind to hit a 400-series highway as 4 a.m. for a cleanup job. "If you like your playground," he says, "everything is fun."