

The art of road sweeping critical to road construction

by **PETER KENTER** Feb 27, 2015

While roadbuilders are generally awarded kudos for delivering new projects to the driving public, little credit goes to road sweeping contractors who help maintain roads during construction and afterwards.



Road sweeping can be under-appreciated by the general public but this service is very important during road construction and afterwards, say its practitioners. These contractors also clean up roads after accidents such as diesel fuel, grocery and gravel spills. - **Photo: CENTENNIAL SWEEPING** Toronto's Centennial Sweeping offers that specialty, in addition to emergency roadside cleanup response to accidents.

The business was founded in 1967 — Canada's centennial — by Bob Chabot.

"He started working as a dump truck contractor, hauling aggregate and other materials for roadbuilding crews, then saw an opportunity to provide sweeping services," says Ray Chabot, Bob's son and Centennial's current owner. "I was a bit of a gearhead and enjoyed machinery as a kid, so I tagged along with my dad. After finishing college I joined the business full time."

Ray's father passed away five years ago, leaving him to run the business at age 29. Centennial employs an average of 50 drivers and dozens of vehicles including sweepers and hot and cold water delivery tankers.

Road construction debris is generally too heavy to be lifted by vacuum, so mechanical sweepers pick up dirt and place it on a conveyor belt. The company manufactures its own specialty equipment to make sweeping safer.

"My dad was very inventive," says Chabot. "Initially, you would have to stop on the highway to empty the sweeper into the dump truck. In the 1980s, he developed the overhead sweeper — a mechanical sweeper that used a conveyor to move debris over top of the truck, directly into a dump truck following behind, convoy style. This was much safer and made crews more productive."

The busy season lasts from April 1 to winter. Sweepers are kept busy on new highway construction, construction maintenance and cleaning roads around other construction projects.

"We do a lot of work on shave and paves, where milling machines take off a layer of asphalt," says Chabot. "We follow a half-kilometre behind, cleaning the surface before repaving. It's critical that the road contractor specifies enough sweepers to do the work on schedule. Often, there's enough debris that we would ideally send two sweepers to work side by side."

Everybody's bidding tight these days and it's no fun during a time crunch at five in the morning, when roads are scheduled to reopen at six. However, most of the road contractors are pretty good about specifying enough sweeping equipment."

Centennial crews are also kept busy on new construction projects, performing daily cleanups on public thoroughfares and unassumed roads on behalf of builders.

Emergency road cleanups following vehicle accidents and spills are another specialty. Centennial crews have cleaned highways of anything from diesel fuel to beer, groceries, gravel, garbage, furniture, gigantic rolls of newsprint and electronics to a load of engine blocks. Often, the debris must be moved by excavator and placed into bins to be assessed by insurance companies covering the accidental loss.

"The worst was a load of blood and offal from a rendering plant," says Chabot. "We needed to use a front-end loader to scrape it up and then wash the road to remove the slime. Working on a job like this, nobody stops to say hello to you."

A spill of metal debris over a huge length of the 407 inspired Centennial to develop a magnetic sweeper featuring an eight-foot-wide electromagnet that wouldn't have looked out of place on an episode of *Breaking Bad*.

"It will pick up a 200-lb. bumper," says Chabot. "We'll often use it for additional maintenance for roads and parking lots around construction."

When road construction slows down in winter, the sweepers are overhauled and intricate mechanical and hydraulic systems are fine-tuned. Centennial also supplies road salt and uses its water trucks to deliver hot water to melt ice and snow on construction sites, or to thaw the ground on tunneling projects.

"We've also performed a few interesting side services with the water trucks, including delivering water to the Papal Mass by Pope John Paul II for World Youth Day in 2003 at Downsview Park," says Chabot. The following year, crews operated misting stations for half a million fans of AC/DC and the Rolling Stones during the hot weather at Molson Canadian Rocks, also at Downsview.

"What we do is critical to road construction and maintenance," says Chabot. "However, whether that's appreciated by the general public depends on the situation. If we're cleaning up a construction site just before the road opens, they're honking at us. If we're clearing the road after a rollover, we're heroes."



Among the responsibilities of road sweeping contractors on new construction projects are daily cleanups on public thoroughfares and unassumed roads on behalf of builders.