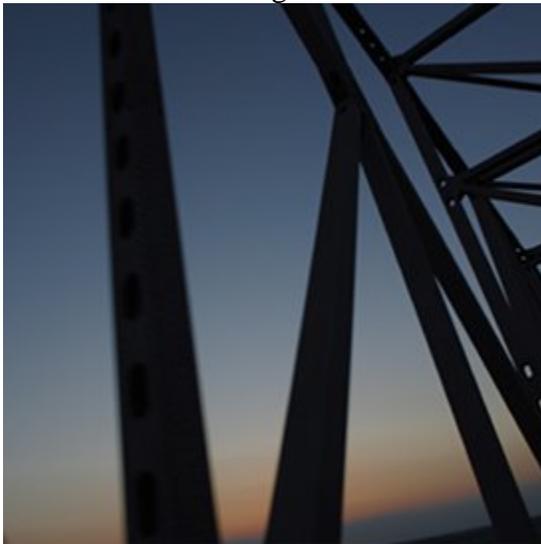


INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVES: Ontario can act on excess construction soil

by [Andy Manahan](#) Feb 24, 2015 last update: Mar 5, 2015

Many infrastructure projects are underway across Ontario. Construction crews are building and repairing roads and replacing old sewers and water mains. In urban areas, rapid transit lines are being built. New housing, commercial and institutional projects are also being developed to accommodate future growth.



These projects have resulted in 20 to 25 million cubic metres of excess soils being generated from these excavations each year in Ontario — enough to completely fill the Rogers Centre in Toronto more than 15 times. There is a growing recognition by municipalities, the public and the construction sector that the current approach to managing excess soil is not working as effectively as it should. Construction companies and contractors have few options for disposing of excess soil, which means that it has to be hauled long distances to designated landfills in rural Ontario. Across the province, this creates an additional tax burden of up to \$1.7 billion every year.

For many basic municipal infrastructure projects, transporting and disposing excess soils increases the cost by five to 25 per cent. The extra truck traffic creates harmful greenhouse gas emissions and increases wear and tear on our roads and highways. For example, disposing of the excess soils generated by the Eglinton Crosstown Light Rail Transit project in Toronto will take 150,000 truck trips and produce 60,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide.

Most of the excess soil is dealt with responsibly but a few unscrupulous operators illegally dispose of soils without permits. Although soil from urban road beds often contains salt – viewed as relatively clean – there are cases where soils with more harmful contaminants are dumped

illegally. Public confidence in the process is thus eroded when these situations are brought to light.

There is a better way. We need to start thinking of "clean" excess soils from construction projects as a resource that can be reused beneficially. With better testing and tracking methods, it is possible to determine which soils can be safely reused and to ensure that these soils end up in suitable locations.

While it is legal, and despite all the space we have in Ontario, the "dig and dump" approach is unsustainable in the longer term. It is preferable to beneficially reuse as much of this excess soil as possible in infrastructure projects close to the point of origin.

Reuse of excess construction soils has several major benefits:

- It keeps property taxes lower by reducing transportation and disposal costs for municipal infrastructure projects. This means that more infrastructure funding will actually be spent on these projects rather than on hauling dirt all over the province.
- It improves air quality by reducing the number of trips taken by large trucks moving soil to distant landfills.
- It means that our roads will be safer and last longer due to less heavy truck traffic.

Ontario has already taken an important step to encourage the responsible reuse of excess construction soils, and reduce the amount of construction material that is being dumped in landfills. Last January, the Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change released a Best Management Practices (BMPs) guide for soil management. When properly implemented and used, these BMPs give municipalities the ability to make sure that clean soils are reused wherever possible, and safely disposed of when they can't be.

At the same time, the provincial government is undertaking a much broader review of provincial soil policies. This review is an important step, but we can't afford to put these much needed BMPs on the sidelines as more and more excess construction soil is being generated.

Municipalities, the construction sector and the provincial government have the opportunity to start getting these BMPs in place right now. Local governments have an important role to play by passing resolutions and by-laws which encourage BMPs, and by referencing BMPs in tendering and procurement documents. In this way, we can all benefit from the safe, local re-use of excess construction soils.

The provincial government needs to do more to support municipalities that are ready to implement the BMPs in their communities, and to crack down on unscrupulous companies that illegally dump or sell contaminated soil in rural communities.

The construction industry has taken the lead by creating SOiiL, an online soil-matching and tracking service based on tried-and-tested methods used in the United Kingdom. Construction

and excavation projects that generate excess soils are matched with other projects, like sewers and water mains, which can reuse these soils locally. Municipalities and construction companies are encouraged to sign up, as this will create a safer, more environmentally-friendly way of dealing with excess soils.

To learn more about how reusing excess construction soils can protect the environment and make infrastructure projects more affordable, visit <http://www.soil.com>.

Andy Manahan is the executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO). He also is a member of the Daily Commercial News Editorial Advisory Board.