

William Conway, Progress Photography

SPECIAL FEATURE

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# GENERAL & TRADE CONTRACTING

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Career Profile

A series of Toronto hallmark projects dot Blackman’s resume

**DAN O'REILLY**  
CORRESPONDENT

Construction industry veteran Brian Blackman may be more focused on his next project than paying attention to advertisements about the adventures active people lead once they leave the working world.

Retirement, however, is not far off for the 61-year-old EllisDon general superintendent who can look back on almost 40 years in construction, 31 of which have been with his current employer.

“Technology has come a long way, but it doesn’t solve all the problems,”

Brian Blackman  
EllisDon

During his time with EllisDon he has either supervised or helped manage the construction of some of Toronto’s premier buildings including The SkyDome (now Rogers Centre), Holiday Inn King Street, Princess of Wales Theatre, Toronto Western Hospital and Waterpark Place.

He has witnessed many industry changes, the most notable of which is the wide use of technology, both as a communication tool and in the actual building process.

On his most recent project, the Joseph Brant Hospital Redevelopment in Burlington, “switchable” glass which allows nurses to change glass on the sliding doors from clear to opaque with the flip of a switch was installed.

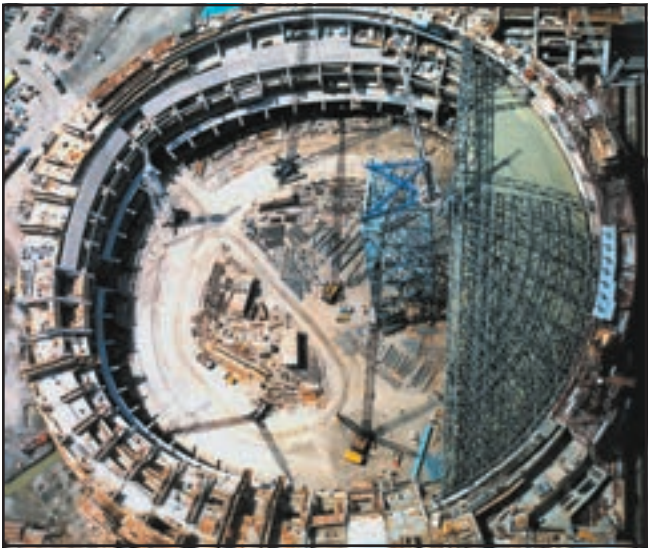
Thirty years ago a supervisor who needed to pass on information to a tradesperson had to make a telephone call from a land line to a printing company for a copy of the construction drawing. Then the drawing would have to be delivered to the construction site, he says.

“Now you can simply pull the drawing up on a computer and either phone or email it to their (the tradesperson) computer/phone instantly.”

At the same time, he cautions against an overreliance on computers and other electronic devices.

“Technology has come a long way, but it doesn’t solve all the problems. The guy pouring concrete doesn’t have time to look at an iPad.”

Apart from working hard, Blackman credits being at the right place at the right time for his success. As an 18-year-old fresh out of high school, he wasn’t sure what



ELLISDON

EllisDon was awarded the design-build contract to build the SkyDome for a lump sum price of \$184.2 million. Blackman worked on the stadium project during its construction.



DAN O'REILLY

EllisDon general superintendent Brian Blackman supervised the construction of the new tower at WaterPark Place. One of the last tasks on this project was the installation of lead tenant RBG’s signature art piece, Compartment Earth, by artist Roxy Paine, in the lobby. Blackman has been with EllisDon for 31 years.

he was going to do. At the urging of his parents he went to work for his older brother, a land surveyor at a construction firm.

“I started out as a rodman and then advanced to an instrument man and by the end of my first year was running a crew.”

Much of the surveying was in the residential sector. Then the company was hired as the quality checkers for Stelco’s Nanticoke Steel Works which was being built by the now-defunct Pigot Construction. It was the surveyors’ responsibility to ensure the location and tolerances of elements, such as eight-inch-diameter anchoring bolts for coke ovens and blast furnaces, was correct.

“Needless to say, I got to know the construction surveyors quite well.”

During a chance conversation he learned the contractor’s field engineer was being paid more for similar duties and that was the incentive to apply for a position with Pigot. He was hired as a field engineer for a project in Hamilton, Ont.

“I worked on several jobs, learned how to read construction drawings, and worked closely with the superintendent to see how they ran jobs.”

A few years later those projects started to slow down and the senior superintendent left to manage the construction of Toronto’s SkyDome for EllisDon.

“He asked if I would be interested in joining him and I jumped at the chance. It (SkyDome) was extremely rewarding,” says Blackman, who started as a field engineer and rose to become an intermediate superintendent.

From there he gradually moved up the construction management ladder, assuming the role of general superintendent about five years ago.

“As a general superintendent I am responsible for all aspects of the actual construction site. These duties include worker safety, public safety, schedule, cost, quality, trade co-ordination, and client satisfaction.”

In that role he visits sites prior to construction to better understand conditions such as traffic flow, pedestrian access, overhead wires, buried services, and the distance from neighbouring buildings. Once construction is underway he usually leaves his Hamilton home between 4 a.m. and 5 a.m. so he can be the first person there.

“The trades respect you for that.”

Asked about his most challenging project, he cites the 2010 to 2012 construction of a new four-level building at Hamilton’s Juravinski Hospital. Not only did the first level have to be carved out of Niagara Escarpment bedrock, the building was very close to the still-operational old wing.

“We had to be very careful every time the crane was swung.”

Equal care had to be exercised in the demolition of the old wing which occurred once the hospital took possession of the new structure, he says.

Not quite as complicated, but still challenging was the simultaneous interior rehabilitation of the existing WaterPark Place on Toronto’s Queen’s Quay Toronto and the construction of a new 30-storey tower between 2012 and 2016. The lead tenant is RBG and one of the last tasks was installing Compartment Earth, a 16,000-pound stainless steel globe-like structure, in the lobby. Designed by Roxy Paine, the signature art piece is clearly visible to passersby.

Blackman says his next project will be a 30-storey office tower which may start later this fall and take between two and half to three years to complete. At that point he will be 64 and will have to choose between accepting another project or retiring.

When asked what he will do if retirement does beckon, Blackman says he has no specific plan and is not worried about the future.

“I do know that I will look forward to the fact that on some windy cold wintery morning at 4 a.m., instead of worrying about whether something blew off the roof or if the heaters shut down and all the pipes froze inside the building, I can simply roll over, go back to sleep and say to myself that it is someone else’s worry now.”



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Training

OAPC paves the way for future workforce with scholarships

DAN O'REILLY  
CORRESPONDENT

An appeal made five years ago to the asphalt roadbuilding industry to become more active in recruiting young people is reaping results.

The Ontario Asphalt Pavement Council (OAPA) — formerly the Ontario Hot Mix Producers Association — has awarded 26 scholarships to 32 college students in the heavy duty equipment technician and heavy duty equipment operator programs under its Roads Scholars Program.

‘The seminars are a good way for students to learn about the industry,’

Mike Deckert  
Flo Components vice-president

The program was launched in 2013 and the council estimates 30 per cent of the award recipients are now working in construction, although perhaps not all in its sector.

“That is based on what we’re seeing on Facebook, LinkedIn, and other social media,” says Mike Deckert, vice-president of Flo Components and chair of the council’s plant paving committee.

The 14-member volunteer committee was tasked with creating the program after former association president Murray Ritchie told the board of directors something needed to be done to bring young people into the industry, says Deckert.

“The first question we asked was ‘how are we going to do this?’”

It was eventually decided scholarships should be awarded to students in both the heavy duty technician and heavy duty equipment operator programs because those programs were best suited to meet the industry’s needs.

After research was conducted by each committee member, a list of potential college partners was narrowed down to four: Centennial College in Scarborough, Conestoga College’s Guelph campus, Sir Sandford Fleming in Lindsay and Georgian College in Barrie.

At the end of what turned-out-to-be six months of work, the committee presented its recommendations to the board of directors.

“This is how the program is going to work and the budget we need,” Deckert recalls saying.

There wasn’t any hesitation on the board’s part in approving the program’s goals and funding for those scholarships, although that funding has to be approved annually, he says.

Each year eight students from the four participating colleges, half from the technician and half from the operator programs, receive \$1,000 scholarships.

“They’re selected, not just on academic

standing, but also if they have demonstrated leadership skills. The colleges have also developed their own criteria.”

However, the scholarships are one component of the three-point program. As a further inducement to consider a career in the asphalt industry, a select number of students are invited to participate in OAPC’s spring operation seminars. Held just before the paving season starts, the seminars are networking and learning events for its members who are comprised of both companies who lay down pavement and asphalt plant producers.

A \$300 registration fee is waived for invited students and other students who are interested in attending are only charged \$50. The participants are not necessarily the same people as the scholarship winners, says Deckert.

“They (the seminars) are a good way for students to learn about the industry and talk to potential employers.”

The third plank, and one which the college partners were asked to agree to, is a yearly presentation in those college of approximately 45-minutes about the industry and its career opportunities. It is presented by two OAPC members, one from plant paving committee and a board director, says Deckert.

As well, the program has been expanded since its implementation. After it was learned that high percentage of the scholarship winners had found employment in construction, the question posed to the committee was: “How can we expand it?”

‘This is a career, not a job,’

Mike Deckert  
Flo Components vice-president

The answer is an initiative designed to meet the requirements of OAPC’s second sector —the asphalt plant producers who need trades such as millwrights and welder/fabricators.

Those programs are offered at Canadore College in North Bay and Algonquin College in Ottawa, both of which are now partners. Having them on board broadens the program’s geographic reach and ensures it isn’t just restricted to colleges in southern Ontario, says Deckert.

Another recent development is the creation of a portal on the OAPC’s website where students can post their resumes.

Asked why the plant paving committee members devote so much of their free time to the development of the program, Deckert replies: “They have a commitment to their companies and the industry and are inspired by the need to contribute. The message we want to send (to the students), is the science of the profession. This is a career, not a job.”



CONESTOGA COLLEGE/GUELPH CAMPUS

Pictured here is the fundamentals class for students working in Conestoga College’s electrical lab/classroom with wall mounted light boards. This room allows students to immediately test out theories and lessons they learn in class.

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Career Profile

# There’s always something to learn at a job site, says curtain wall vet

**DAN O'REILLY**  
CORRESPONDENT

With almost 30 years of experience as a curtain wall supervisor/installer with Brampton, Ont.-based C3 Polymeric, Bill Martin has definite views on the trade and who should get into it.

“You’re either cut out for this work or you’re not, and not everyone is,”

Bill Martin  
Veteran curtain wall supervisor/installer

“You’re either cut out for this work or you’re not and not everyone is,” says Martin, the company’s most experienced supervisor and who also is comfortable doing his own rigging.

In that role he does double duty working on swing stages erecting curtain walls right along the crews who are C3 employees, not subtrades. The only exception is public institution projects with procurement policies dictating the use of unionized workers, he points out.

It’s also a position requiring a constant monitoring of weather conditions. If it’s too windy or rainy work can’t proceed and the crews either have to be sent home, moved to low storey buildings where booms can be used, or assigned other tasks.

Weather was certainly a factor in the timing of curtain wall retrofit of a downtown Toronto office tower which was scheduled to get underway in early October.

“The (first) week was a total write off.”

The former Newfoundland native’s entry into the business was through a rather circuitous route.



Bill Martin has almost 30 years of experience as a curtain wall supervisor/installer.

After finishing high school he followed his older brother’s advice to move to Ontario and apply for a position with C3 where the brother worked. At that time it was known as Polymeric Engineering.

He was hired and worked as a labourer for about six or seven years and then decided to enlist in the Canadian Armed Forces, a decision he’s never regretted.

“I got to see the world, but at the end of my three-year term decided that was enough.”

Returning to civilian life was fairly seamlessly as Polymeric asked him back. A few years later he was laid off, although was soon hired by Clifford Masonry and became a certified mason by studying part time at Mohawk College.

Martin might have stayed with Clifford if it hadn’t been for urgent phone call from Polymeric urging him to return to the company as it needed someone to supervise the

restoration of a smokestack at Hamilton’s McMaster University.

“That was in the late 1980s and I have been with them ever since,” Martin, noting that subsequently the company began focusing on curtain wall installation under the direction of a new owner.

In his almost three decades on the job there have been a lot of changes. In the past 15 years or so there has been a major focus on formal training by the industry. There has also been an increased emphasis on safety and regulation procedures following the 2009 Christmas Eve swing stage collapse which killed four workers.

Martin, however, learned his skills on the job and says he never stops learning. An example was the retrofit of the two towers at Toronto City Hall where he supervised a union crew which included a journeyman glazier.

“I kept picking pointers up from him.”

In response to a question on the attributes which make for a good curtain wall installer, he explains that: “It’s like any other trade. They have to work safely, be good at math and layouts and not be afraid of heights.”

Sometimes that fear is not readily evident. On one project a new employee literally ‘froze’ when the swing stage reached the six-storey level. Martin had to calm him down while carefully lowering the swing stage back to the ground.

“I told him to be careful, not to move, and not to grab hold of me,” says Martin, who uses the comparison of a drowning person who will try to grab a rescuer with the result both lives are potentially endangered.

“At the end of the day I want to go home and I want my workers to go home as well,” says Martin on the need to constantly stress workplace safety.

For those who are not intimidated by working at heights, however, there are lots of opportunities, he says.

“Just look at all the glass buildings in Toronto.”

Although not compulsory, there is a formal apprenticeship process through the Ontario College of Trades for curtain wall installers now formally known as architectural glass and metal technicians.

“They have to complete 8,000 hours of training, which includes three eight-week sessions of schooling, and write a final exam before receiving their Certificate of Qualifications,” says Ray Preston, business representative for Local 1819 of the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades.

Training for both unionized and non-unionized apprentices is available through the Ontario Industrial Finishing Skills Centre, says Preston.

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Woodstock Art Gallery



Legislation

Sweeping labour code changes mostly bypass construction industry

IAN HARVEY  
CORRESPONDENT

As the Ontario legislature debates Bill 148 to bring a multitude of changes to employment and labour law, including raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, there's little impact on the construction sector, says leading Toronto labour lawyer Martin Z. Rosenbaum.

Bill 148, The Fair Workplaces, Better Jobs Act, 2017, (was in second reading) would make wholesale changes to the Employment Standards Act (ESA) and the Ontario Labour Relations Act (OLRA).

While provisions around temporary workers, emergency leave and minimum wage won't impact the construction sector there were concerns that changes to how union certification proceeds would have an impact.

However, on close reading of the massive bill, Rosenbaum, of Rosenbaum and Ibe, says the wording specifically excludes the construction sector which is defined under Section 126.1 of the OLRA.

"I read the summaries and commentaries and then I read the act several times to get to that," says Rosenbaum who acts for clients during certification and grievance processes.

"But clearly the construction industry is such a unique sector

it makes sense to exclude it here. In drafting this someone has gone through this very meticulously to exclude the construction sector."

However, there are some rumblings in the construction sector, some about the lack of consultation prior to the changes being tabled, the balance over the prospect of change and unintended consequences.

However, Andrew Pariser, vice-president of RESCON, says he's still concerned that the mass of changes to both the ESA and the OLRA could pose problems down the road.

"While we support many things in this Bill and we are appreciative that changes have been made to exclude the construction sector from some of the changes, since it was first tabled and since we made our submissions last July, there are still issues around change," he says.

"We have a level playing field right now in construction where everyone knows the rules and what's expected of them. It's a balance between the unions, the employers and owners. We're concerned that any changes may ultimately change the years of jurisprudence and have a series of unintended consequences."

While the opposition at Queen's Park and others are focused on the minimum wage increase, that won't really affect

the construction sector where wages are already much higher, he says.

"This is a very sensitive sector," he says. "It doesn't like uncertainty. It likes stability."

He says RESCON and all organizations in the industry support the individual workers' right to choose who represents them and that it's not uncommon for trades to change bargaining agents.

"We just worry it's like renovating an old house because these are old pieces of legislation," he says.

"When you tear into a wall and suddenly you find something you didn't expect and now instead of just a kitchen you've got to renovate the basement."

General changes to the OLRA will speed up the certification process for non-construction businesses, says Pat Dillon of the Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council of Ontario, which represents 150,000 trades workers.

"It will mean getting a list of employees from the employer will be easier and stop the games they sometimes play," he says.

Dillon also noted the restoration of some of the powers of the OLRB will speed things up. These powers were originally brought in by then Ontario Premier Bob Rae of the NDP and then taken out by the subsequent Conservative government of Mike Harris.

"This will clean up the rules to expedite decisions which will probably mean less hours at the Ontario Labour Relations Board for lawyers."

Bill 148 brings card-based union certification for the temporary help agency industry, the building services sector and home care and community services industry, aligning it with the construction industry practice.

It eliminates conditions for remedial union certification, allowing unions to more easily get certified when an employer engages in misconduct that contravenes the OLRA.

And it also makes access to

first contract arbitration easier, adding an intensive mediation component to the process.

Rosenbaum says restoring the powers of the OLRB to order automatic certification in the event of a bad faith actions or breach of the rules by an employer during the process will clean things up.

"That hammer was always there but it's something employers should never do anyway," he says.

"I always tell them, contact me before you do anything, it's better to spent \$250 with me now than \$25,000 to deal with it at the OLRB."

Sid Returns



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