The Ontario government announced the closure of non-essential businesses and extended its lockdown for another 14 days. And on April 11, the agency painted a very grim picture of the Ontario government has expanded the list of non-essential businesses and extended its lockdown further to May 12. However, given the steady decline in the incidence of the coronavirus locally, in the United States and in Europe, and the easing of lockdowns in several countries, we expect the province to follow suit by mid-May or early June. A surprising this happens, both construction and home sales should pick up steam. However, their return to pre-COVID levels will likely take several quarters and extend into next year.

Now there are concerns those scenarios could be repeated this year. Based on factors such as heavy rain fall, run on residential construction levels in Lake Erie, which flows into Lake Ontario, and the heightened uncertainty regarding over-year gain (almost +50%) in the first two weeks of March, the heightened uncertainty regarding individual health, a concomitant drop in hiring due to government lockdowns and the strong recommendation by the Toronto Regional Real Estate Board to stop conducting open houses caused home sales to drop by 16% in the second half of the month compared to the same period a year earlier.

Given the fact that the lockdown of non-essential activities has been extended to mid-May and, also, given the significant erosion of consumer confidence reported by Bloomberg, we expect home sales will probably stagnate throughout May and early June.

Gart lockdown to sideline 125,000 to 150,000 construction workers for April and May

Going forward, there is no doubt that construction employment will contract sharply in a year and remain depressed in May, for the following reasons. First, the Ontario government has locked down the majority of construction projects in the province with the exception of those it considers critical, including hospitals, roads and bridges, into mid-May. All residential construction is suspended except for projects near completion.

Second, the suspension of both residential and non-residential permit issuances in late March will create a regulatory hurdle that will delay the start of new projects, once the government does lift its lockdown on new construction.

A third factor which is likely to hobble both residential and non-residential construction in the Toronto region is lingering uncertainty about whether the COVID crisis has really passed.

Declining incidence of COVID-19 locally and globally bodes well for RE2 rebound

The near-term outlook for the Toronto economy in general and the construction sector is, for want of a better word, grim. However, given the steady decline in the incidence of the coronavirus locally, in the United States and in Europe, and the easing of lockdowns in several countries, we expect the province to follow suit by mid-May or early June. A surprising this happens, both construction and home sales should pick up steam. However, their return to pre-COVID levels will likely take several quarters and extend into next year.

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Taking action to tackle Canada’s contaminated sites

GRANT CAMERON
CORRESPONDENT

Illegal dumping, unauthorized activities and mining, oil and gas developments have left behind countless contaminated sites in harbours, industrial areas and First Nations communities across Canada.

The sites range from small areas of soil polluted by spilled fuel or leaking batteries to large abandoned mine sites and other properties spoiled by heavy metals and substances dangerous to human health.

The federal government, however, has been tackling the problem with a great degree of success. A Federal Contaminated Sites Action Plan (FCSAP) has so far restored nearly 17,000 sites across the country. There were 23,710 sites on the list of properties when the program was launched in 2005. Today, that number has been whittled down to 6,865 active or suspected sites — a 70 per cent decrease in 15 years.

“Activities over the last century have left an environmental legacy that includes uncontaminated dump sites, abandoned mines, contaminated military installations, leaking fuel tanks and other hazards to human health and the environment,” said Veronica Petro, spokesperson for Environment and Climate Change Canada.

“The federal government established the Federal Contaminated Sites Action Plan in 2005 to address legacy contaminated sites located on federal land and to respond to the need for a co-ordinated approach identified by the auditor general and the commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development.”

The idea originated in 1989 when the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment, comprised of environment ministers from the federal, provincial and territorial governments, and the federal government negotiated a National Contaminated Sites Remediation Program with all the provinces and territories. The program helped remedia orphaned, high-risk contaminated sites for which a responsible party could not be found, or where the property owner was unable or unwilling to finance remediation.

Years later, the federal government formally established the present-day action plan as a co-ordinated approach to the problem.

So far, more than $4.54 billion has been spent on the plan. The government recently received the plan for another 15 years and will be investing another $1.16 billion between 2020 and 2024.

With the new funding, it is estimated that 242 sites will be assessed, and remediation activities will be undertaken on 1,316 sites.

Of these remediation activities, remediation projects will be carried out on about 475 sites in First Nations communities. The investment is expected to support 6,400 new and existing jobs over five years.

The FCSAP funds 85 per cent of total remediation costs for projects under $90 million, with responsible departments, agencies and provincial and territorial governments assuming the balance. Remediation projects with total cost estimates of more than $90 million may be funded entirely by FCSAP.

Remediation of B.C.’s Victoria Harbour was recently completed under the program. In all, 3,000 tonnes of contaminated sediments were removed from the harbour and 75,000 tonnes of contaminated soil, or 52 barge loads, weighing the equivalent of 700 blue whales, were removed from Laurel Point Park.

The successful completion of the Victoria Middle Harbour remediation project was achieved due to the ongoing collaboration and support of the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations, the City of Victoria, neighbouring businesses and residents of Victoria,” said Transport Canada spokesperson Alexandre Desjardins.

“This important work improves the overall health of the harbour and ecosystem, ensuring residents, tourists and marine life can enjoy a clean Victoria harbour for generations to come,” Desjardins said.

Transport Canada has been conducting environmental investigations and remediation projects in Victoria Harbour for several decades and takes environmental stewardship of the harbour seriously.

“Transport Canada recognizes the ongoing industrial, commercial and recreational needs associated with the area and we are working to develop a comprehensive plan that manages the environmental health of Victoria Harbour by seeking to limit recontamination, while encouraging ongoing harbour activity,” he stated.

Gabrielle Boivin, spokesperson for Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, said Indigenous Services Canada has about 2,000 contaminated sites in its active inventory although not all sites are in close proximity to residents in the 3,194 First Nations communities across the country.

The relatively high number of contaminated sites identified in First Nations communities is due to a number of reasons, she said, as there are several ways reserve lands can become polluted.

“Notably, many First Nations communities, in particular northern and remote communities, can be highly dependent on diesel and heating fuel for heating, transportation, and electricity,” she said. “Due to the remoteness of some communities, significant fuel storage capacity is required. The improper storage, transfer and handling of these fuels can result in the contamination of land.”

Other factors such as inadequate waste management support or disposal practices, unauthorized industrial development, illegal dumping and other activities can contribute to contamination, she said.

In addition to First Nations communities, the federal government is also responsible for the management of a portfolio of contaminated sites in the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut.

“Contamination of these properties is primarily the result of private-sector mining and oil and gas activities and government military activity that occurred more than 50 years ago, when environmental impacts were not fully understood,” explained Boivin. “Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada inherited these sites as manager of public lands and owner of last resort in the territories.”

Mining sites like the one pictured here can leave lands polluted by spilled fuel, leaking batteries and heavy metals.

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Heavy lifting required for Sudbury lift station project

DAN O'REILLY
CORRESPONDENT

needed sewage infrastructure and heritage preservation have been seamlessly integrated into a three-phase project in Sudbury, Ont.'s historic Flour Mill community, which dates back to the 1890s and is considered the heart of the city's Franco-Ontarian community.

In a closely co-ordinated operation last fall, its Flour Mill Museum, comprised of a heritage house and log cabin, were excavated, lifted onto large trucks and transported a kilometre away to O'Connor Park and placed on new foundations. The contractor was Greater City Concrete Works.

Erected several decades ago, the frame house-sized buildings are considered of historic value and the relocation was the only way they could be saved while allowing Sudbury to proceed with its St. Charles Lift Station project.

Tentatively scheduled to get underway later this year, the project will include the construction of a new lift station and a 1,000-metre-long, 660 millimetre forcemain to connect with the city's sanitary rock tunnel via a shaft which will have to be excavated through rock, says Sudbury's water and wastewater projects engineer Ali Ben-Anteur.

In 2009, the old station and existing forcemain were deemed to be nearing the end of their useful life and the building was slated for demolition as it was considered unsafe. “The lift station is the oldest and largest in Sudbury and the existing forcemain is in bad condition,” he says.

An environmental assessment completed a few years later recommended rebuilding a new onsite station and the construction of a new forcemain. As the museum buildings are on the same site, the recommendation presented some major complications.

“There simply was not enough available room to build the new station,” he explains.

Rather than simply taking the easy route of demolishing the buildings, the city was committed to saving them right from the start, Ben-Anteur says.

In the long lead-up to last fall’s relocation there was considerable consultation and preparation among various municipal departments, the city’s heritage committee, R. V. Anderson Associates Limited, the overall consultant for the lift station project and the community at large.

There were several issues that had to be resolved including the cataloguing, handling and temporary storage of the museum artifacts which include antique furniture, tools, household items and memorabilia. As well, a structural engineering assessment had to be conducted to determine if it was feasible to move the buildings and some structural reinforcement of one building was necessary, he says.

Although the museum’s new home is within the same neighbourhood, the relocation was challenging and lengthy as roads had to be closed and hydro lines disconnected, while keeping the disruption to area residents as minimal as possible. But the move only took a day and hydro service resumed that same day. For now, the structures remain closed while the city prepares integrated approaches that will enhance the experience of visitors to the museum and the park’s other facilities, he says.

Of equal complexity will be the erection of the new lift station and the simultaneous decommissioning of the existing one which has to be kept operating until construction has been completed.

“To do this, we will have to design a bypass system capable of handling existing flows without any impact to residents, businesses and the environment,” he adds.

As for the forcemain, it will have to cross Notre Dame Avenue, a major road with heavy traffic and pass through some challenging terrains along the route to the existing sewer tunnel. To minimize the disruption, trenchless technologies will be used, he says.

At this stage, a contractor has not been selected. But the design is being finalized and the hope is that construction will start later this year. Of course, that depends on how and when the COVID-19 crisis is resolved, says Ben-Anteur.

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Making Room for Innovation

Banting and Best demo a hands-on job with logistical challenges

IAN HARVEY
CORRESPONDENT

To clear the way for another glasy addition to the Toronto skyline, two structures built to honour a pair of iconic Canadian doctors have been demolished.

The Banting and Best Department of Medical Research, known as the Banting and Best building at 112 College St., were taken down by Priestly Demolition over the winter.

In its place two travertine glass towers will rise, the Schwartz Resman Innovation Centre, designed by New York-based Weiss/Manfredi Architects in collaboration with Teeple Architects of Toronto.

The buildings are not the University of Toronto labs where doctors Frederick Banting and Charles Best discovered insulin in 1923 but were erected in 1951 to 1954 in their honour.

Banting worked with newly graduated Best in Professor John Macleod’s labs in the 1920s to find a cure for diabetes, as a diagnostic at the time was a death sentence. James Collip eventually worked with them to perfect a process of extracting insulin from animal pancreases. Banting and Macleod won a Nobel Prize for their work in 1923.

The innovation centre will bring 750,000 square feet to the Toronto skyline, two structures built to honour a pair of iconic Canadian doctors have been demolished.

"They were two buildings joined by a bridge," says Brian Priestly, vice-president of operations at the family business.

"That was work to take down by hand. We had to expose the steel by chipping away at the bricks and then cut the steel with a torch."

In fact, the demolition of the four-storey brown brick structures was full of challenges for what is a relatively small project, compared to some Priestly has tackled over the decades.

"SickKids was probably more of a logistical challenge," says Priestly. "But this one was very labour intensive."

The interior floors were too weak to support machinery so only small Bobcats could be used sparingly. The unexpected discovery of asbestos led to the demolition being shut down while it was abated.

Work resumed around Christmas 2019 and wrapped in early March of this year, but the company will be back this summer to take out the foundations once the caissons have been placed.

"We had to chip away all the terracotta and other masonry by hand," he says. "We took hundreds of tons of masonry rubble out and down to the lake. But getting vehicles and trailers in and out was also a challenge."

The site is on the east side of College Street at University, smack dab at the head of Hospital Alley at the crossroads of the University of Toronto’s corridor of buildings. It’s packed with traffic, people and transit and as such is another one of those inner city sites where logistics play a huge role.

With the advent of new transit lines across Eglinton Avenue, plans are already in motion to demolish and replace a lot of the 1950s and 1960s mid and low rises across the Yonge and Eglinton area which will mean a lot of more tight site locations and logistical challenges for both demolition and reconstruction.

"There’s also a daycare to the north of the site at the Ministry of Infrastructure building, so we had to build a canopy there and we couldn’t move trucks in and out or do some work during certain hours because of the kids. We had five people just to direct traffic when the trucks were moving because we didn’t want to disrupt transit," Priestly says. "And we had to keep the dust down because of the kids and the location, so lots of water for dust suppression."

They did manage to get a Volvo 700 excavator into the location, which is also fitted with a dust suppression system, he adds.

As of March, the buildings were razed to the foundations at ground level and the two level basement backfilled with aggregate so that construction crews can move into stable ground and start sinking their caissons for the new building.

"Once they're done with the caissons they'll pull out the aggregate and we'll move in to take the foundations out," says Priestly.

Our COVID-19 construction resource hub is open for you

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