



Meet the Makers

On your first 20-minute jaunt from the airport to downtown Vancouver, think about the sweat that went into building the Canada Line

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The exuberance of youth can make people do crazy things. Jason York and Bryan Hall were just a pair of 20-something British Columbia lads working for a Surrey-based contractor when they first discussed breaking off on their own to start a new construction business in the early 1990s. While any entrepreneurial venture comes with risk, an ailing B.C. economy meant that York and Hall would face even more challenges if their proposed business was ever going to get off the ground.

Both are intelligent men with a strong work ethic. But both admit they had no idea what they were getting into when they founded Tyam Construction Ltd. back in 1993.

"We were too ignorant to realize how much work it was going to be and the time and commitment it was going to take," Hall says with a laugh.

Now 15 years into it, Tyam Construction is a recognized player in the booming B.C. construction industry with a well-earned rep for completing large-scale civil engineering projects on time and on budget. The company outgrew its original Langley location, is

now based in Surrey and employs about 500 people. It's a number that Hall, 40, and York, 39, couldn't have imagined when they were getting started, when they began working endless hours in the midst of the lean 1990s. Even so, they dreamed big.

"We never set out just to be a small contractor," says York. "From the outset, we wanted to be a major player. We wanted to be a leader, not a follower."

Tyam has landed some huge jobs over the years, the most notable being the Canada Line project. It entailed the construction of two 6.5-kilometre reinforced concrete tunnels beneath Vancouver's Cambie Street, all part of a massive city transit makeover before the 2010 Olympic Games. "If you come to Vancouver, that's really the first thing you'll see," says York. "You're going to hit the airport, jump on a tram and in 20 minutes, you'll be in the downtown core."

But, according to Hall and York, it was a job in 1997 that changed the fortunes of the company. Tyam was hired to do full site service, site grading and building excavation for a Famous Players 3D theatre complex in north Langley. The company worked on that big job for 10

months, grabbing the attention of engineers and developers in the area.

"At that particular time, it was one of our biggest contracts," Hall recalls. "That was a project that put us on the map as a contractor who could take on bigger projects and get them done in a timely fashion and on budget."

"It got us up to the next tier of jobs," adds York.

The owners have seen the company continue to grow, despite another stretch of economic uncertainty in B.C. in the earlier part of this decade. When Vancouver won its bid to host the Olympics, it brought some much needed optimism to the Lower Mainland, ultimately helping businesses like Tyam. But the main reason that Hall and York have survived and prospered is the long-term vision they have had for their own operation.

York says that obtaining strong personnel is one of the biggest challenges in the construction industry, particularly when the focus is on large-scale projects. Both he and Hall knew that any future successes would hinge on getting the best people available, a practice they have had since the very beginning.



"The big thing for us is that we definitely wanted to treat our people well," says York. "We came out of the end of an era where there was a lot of intimidation and a lot of yelling and screaming going on," he says of the old-school mentality that was prevalent in the trade.

"Construction was the last bastion to evolve" he says. "We wanted an honest day's work for an honest day's pay out of the guys. By the same token, we treated them with a lot of respect."

York adds that the company was lucky to get some talented people early on in the process. Tyam's reputation was cemented through years of hard work, perseverance and good people. It didn't go unnoticed. And industry came calling. Even through the periods when they struggled financially, Hall and York opted to hire strong candidates because it made sense for the future. "If we thought they were worth hiring," says Hall, "we took that chance."

Marc de Boer, Tyam's Finning rep in Surrey, isn't surprised that the owners' visionary business methods have paid off. He met Hall and York about a decade ago and has been in charge of their account for the past three years. De Boer says the pair is always looking for new and exciting jobs and they aren't afraid to be a little aggressive. "They're willing to try new things and take some risks," de Boer says. "Their entrepreneurial spirit got them through all those tough times. They're now riding on the other side of the wave."

Of the company's large fleet of heavy equipment, a significant portion is Caterpillar.

"The first four machines we ever bought were Cats," says York, referring to a 322L excavator, a 320BL, a 330BL and a D3 tractor.

In an effort to become more of a full service, one-stop company, Tyam got into the shoring business about a year ago. (Shoring entails digging the foundations for parkades in high rises, sometimes going as deep as 70 feet below ground level, depending on how much parking is required.) The company had to purchase a variety of Cat soil compactors for the new shoring end of the business. And when Tyam landed the contract to work on the Canada Line project, it invested in more iron, including a project-specific 345 variable gauge excavator that has adjustable tracks.

The Canada Line is by far Tyam's biggest project to date. They began work in the fall of 2005 and will complete it by summer 2008. York describes it as a subway line that goes both overhead and underground, beginning at the Vancouver International Airport and ending in the city's downtown core. Developer SNC-Lavalin hired three different companies to complete the monumental project, with Tyam's contribution coming on the Cambie Street portion of the line.

Tyam was responsible for the relocation of utilities and the actual excavation and construction of the tunnel itself for that specific stretch. With as many as 250 employees on the job at peak periods, Tyam will eventually have

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excavated about 480,000 m³ of land, poured 117,000 m³ of concrete and used 13,000 metric tonnes of steel to get their end done. The owners say they had plenty of challenges in executing such a large project but now, almost

three years into it, they can literally see the light at the end of the tunnel.

"Traffic was probably the number one issue on that project," says Hall. Cambie Street is one of the main corridors in downtown Vancouver. Minimizing the disturbance to traffic was a challenge that the company was able to handle with confidence. For two young B.C. natives who started a company in the midst of a turbulent economy 15 years ago, the completion of the Canada Line is a great source of pride. The Olympics were the impetus for the project, but York and Hall know that their company has played a key role in building something that will provide service and functionality to Vancouverites long after the flame is doused at the Games.

"To be a part of something that will be a part of Vancouver's history forever and a day, that we helped lend a hand to – there's just a huge amount of pride in that," says York. ■