The Collet Canal
and North Creek Dredging and Lining
Project

The Southside Poverty Alleviation Project

Funded by: The OPEC Fund for
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Work associated with the Collet and North Creek Canal dredging and lining project continues to be carried out by contractor Cisco Construction Limited. During the last week of March, the company supervised pile driving. Approximately four hundred and fifty (450) piles will be driven into the Collet Canal extending from the Armadillo Street pedestrian bridge to the Vernon Street Bridge. The pile caps will be severed then joined together with a precast beam and capped with concrete.

Cisco Construction Limited has made a personal commitment to use manual labour wherever possible for the duration of the project. The management team is confident that it can produce quality work within the agreed budget and timeframe without reliance on heavy duty equipment. The company has hired workmen from the Belize City neighbourhoods near the project area. But different neighbourhoods mean different street gangs and it was initially feared that the members of warring factions would lead to on-site conflicts. Assistant Project Manager John Mason says those fears have proved to be unfounded. “Things have been working out very well. I expected incidents because all predictions showed that one set of workers would never cross the bridge into another gang’s turf. But the word is out that we are not here to play and we’re not tolerating any nonsense,” says Masson. “We work these men hard, so hard they are tired at night...too hard to get into any trouble. And at the end of
the day they have money in their pockets. And money talks. We’ve been pretty firm but very fair and we are getting the job done.”
Further along the East Side of Collet Canal, shovelling crews continue to prepare the work site by backfilling the canal.

Above and Below: Shovelling crew near Pound Yard Bridge on the East side of Collet Canal
While pile driving and preparation work is visible to the public, at the main compound of Cisco Construction Limited, additional crews of men are creating U-units. The assembly line starts with lengths of steel. Workers manually cut, bend and tie the steel to create the base of the pre-cast beams and the U-units.

Separate crews are responsible for mixing the cement to create the strongest concrete possible. Workers add a retardant to prevent the concrete from setting too fast as well as a plasticizer to reduce water; water weakens the concrete. The process also includes a curing agent to keep moisture from evaporating too fast.

The concrete mixing process is closely monitored to ensure that every batch of concrete is exactly the same. Kevin Daniels is the Concrete Quality Control Officer on site. He keeps careful records of exactly how much water is added the cement mixture. Under his supervision, the twelve man crew produces seven batches of concrete every hour using a cement barrel mixer. One bucket of every batch of concrete is taken as a quality control sample.
While the cement is mixing, additional workers manually set up the form plates which are used to create the U-units. The manually cut, bent and tied steel are then set within the form plates. Workers then manually dump the concrete by the bucketful into the space between the form plates. A concrete vibrator is then used to eliminate air-pockets and bubbles from the concrete mix. The U-units are then left to cure for approximately ten days.
Plasticizer (above) and retardant (below) are added to the cement mix to produce concrete
Workers manually lift and set up form work plates
Bucket by bucket, the concrete mixture fills the space between the form plates
Steel and Form Work Subcontractor Louis Diaz carefully inspects every U-unit.

Quality Control Tests are performed on every batch of concrete. The samples are prepared by using the exact process as the U-unit.
According to Subcontractor Louis Diaz, the workmen have been receptive to the intense schedule. “I’ve found out that these guys are flexible and willing to learn. They surprise me a lot. I expected them to be stubborn and dragging their feet. They are anything but.”

In fact, the management team of Cisco Construction have discovered that the cement mixing crew, figured out their own production strategy, delegating specific responsibilities to specific persons to make the work easier on themselves without compromising time. Ghost Town area’s deputy leader Stephen “Cat” Requena attributes the ingenuity to his crew’s desire to make money. “This is contract work so how much you put in is how much you get out,” says Requena. “Nobody just wants to hangout and give trouble. This job keeps the guys occupied. I bring twelve guys with me but there are fifty more ready to come to work. I have to take turns every week because ‘man’ get offended when I don’t pick them.”

Evondale Moody, Project Engineer in the Project Execution Unit of the Ministry of Works, is the supervisor of the Collet and North Creek Canal Dredging and Lining Project. Moody says he is impressed by the initial results of Cisco Construction Limited. “The Collet and North Creek Canal Dredging and
Lining Project is one of three projects are currently underway. We have seven more to put to tender in the future. But based on what I have seen so far, certainly we believe that the initiatives being implemented by Cisco Construction Limited can be replicated in those other contracts." According to Moody, labour intensive projects have worked well in other parts of the country, namely the Southern Highway and the Placencia road. “By using more manual labour, it certainly creates more employment for the ‘unemployable’ and the underprivileged members of our society. As for ensuring that everything being done is up to quality standards and within sound engineering, the contractor assumes that risk and that’s why more quality controls are in place to produce the same results as if machines were being used.”

The management team of Cisco Construction Limited will have to use heavy duty equipment for certain aspects of the project such as scarification, grading and compacting work but the company is committed to using manual labour, especially from the adjacent neighbourhoods, at every opportunity to provide meaningful employment for the residents as well as improve the social atmosphere of some of the most violent areas of Belize City.