Toronto Contractor Hits Paydirt
By Don Procter

Bruce McCallum, an estimator for Toronto’s Select Drywall & Acoustics Inc., is spending a lot of time these days away from the office. Most of his working life is at Pearson International Airport, where Select Drywall is installing nearly a mile’s worth of ceilings at new facilities being built as part of the $4.4 billion (Cdn.) project to upgrade Canada’s largest airport.

The $30 million contract is huge in the normal scheme of things done by Select. The estimator says the contract is equivalent in scope to 10 to 12 typical drywall contracts on commercial or residential office towers in Toronto: “On one of those jobs normally you might get five to six change orders a week; here at the airport we might get 10 times that number.”

“McCallum’s responsibilities also include dealing with quality control issues and engineering and design concerns. It all adds up to reams of paperwork. “If you are the type that doesn’t like paperwork and you were working here, you’d think you had died and gone to hell,” he says.

“The project includes ceiling work in the central processor, control tower and liner. The liner is the cavernous passageway leading to arrival and departure gates. The airport contract is Select’s biggest job ever, representing about a third of the company’s total work volume in 2003.

“Just how big it is can be measured in several ways. “You can almost do the take-off in kilometers, it’s that big,” says McCallum. It’s so big that getting from one place to another on site is best done on one of the motorized golf carts introduced to speed crews around.

“During peak construction later this spring, the contractor will employ 130 to 140 drywall applicators, tapers and metal workers. The magnitude of the job hasn’t left Select short of skilled tradespeople, although McCallum says the company has passed up commercial work to maintain a full head of steam at the airport.

“With other drywall contractors working at the $4.4 billion airport project, you might think Select would wrestle competitors tradespeople away to ensure it doesn’t fall short of skilled tradespeople. It’s the type of thing that goes on regularly in the highly competitive and cutthroat Toronto construction industry where labor scarcities abound. But McCallum says Select is committed to a gentleman’s agreement with Downsview Drywall Contracting (See the September 2002 column about Downsview’s airport contract), to not grab each other’s employees. The two companies rely upon each other for contract completion on time and within budget. Any setbacks such as labor shortfalls experienced by Downsview would also delay Select’s contract.

“One of the challenges for the contractor is to meet the precision design specifications required of the ceiling. The building has many ceiling reveals, lines and precision details. “You can’t cut corners because of the high quality standards expected of you.” McCallum says, for instance, if a reveal mould is specified, a regular step mould simply won’t do. If a 3/4-inch reveal is specified, a 5/8-inch won’t pass muster with the design team, even though the general public couldn’t see the difference because the ceiling is 50- to 60-feet high.

McCallum says about 70 percent of the ceiling contract will be completed by June. The timing of the completion of the remaining work depends on other contract completions. “We’re quite confident we’ll meet budget, but we’re just a little concerned about meeting the scheduled dates because of the work being done by other trades. Everyone relies on everyone else,” he says. That’s life on the biggest construction project in Canada.

About the Author
Don Procter is a free-lance writer in Ontario, Canada.