

5.7 TRILLION POUNDS OF EARTH

Raising the rubble



JONAS LEEY/SUN JOURNAL

LAYING DOWN RUBBER: Workers use an excavator to place rubber mats, each weighing 10,000 pounds, over the blasting area at the Wal-Mart distribution center construction site.

When Wal-Mart announced plans to build a distribution center in Lewiston three years ago, there was swirl of controversy. Critics were alarmed that negotiations with the city were kept secret and that the wealthiest company in the world would be getting tax breaks to the tune of \$17 million.

Then the dust settled. Now it's rising again.

In what's being hailed as one of Maine's biggest earth-moving projects, the 144-acre site for the distribution center is being carved from uneven land, a portion of which was the city's gravel pit.

Lots of earth had to be moved. Lots. Construction crews estimate 1.8 million cubic yards.

In layman's terms, that's about 5.7 trillion pounds. Yup, Trillion.

The steady hum of heavy equipment fills the air at the work site, punctuated by a daily explosion as if the earth were hiccuping.

Once the site is level, work will begin on the buildings. A dry goods warehouse will be built first, then a refrigeration warehouse. Together the buildings will cover 20 acres — roughly 25 football fields.

When it's operational, the distribution center will provide about 500 jobs, with an average pay of \$14 per hour. In the meantime, hundreds of construction workers are employed. Some come from Florida and Tennessee, others from the far-flung corners of Maine. They stay in local motels, eat at local restaurants. One state analysis estimates the economic spinoff of the project at \$99 million.

To the casual observer, the work site looks like a vast moonscape. But to others, it's simply pay dirt.

INSIDE SECTION F

Four pages of detailed coverage in the Business section tell you more about this project's massive scale and cost.





PHOTO BY JIM LAMBERT FOR THE NEWSJOURNAL

MAKING TRACKS: One of 14 giant earth-moving trucks, called camels, operates from dawn to dusk at the Wal-Mart distribution center construction site in Lewiston. Each truck carries 25 to 30 cubic yards of dirt.

THE BIG DIG

Excavation for the Wal-Mart distribution center in Lewiston is among the largest earth-moving projects in the state's history

BY CAROL CHU LYAN
Business writer

Tim Frazee gave the unofficial signal. Everyone scurried. They had five minutes to clear the area. Some sought the safety of a pile of dirt more than 75 yards to the north, others opted for a higher spot even farther away.

"Blowing three," crackled a transmitter, marking the official countdown. Frazee, the superintendent of blasting, headed for his truck.

Four minutes later, "Blowing two" came across the transmitter, lingo for warning No. 2. Frazee's blue GMC truck sped across the sandy wasteland that will someday be the foundation of Lewiston's new Wal-Mart distribution center.

One minute later, "All set!" crackled the transmitter. A series of blips responded.

"Fire in the hole, 10-4!"

In the distance, more than two dozen huge

rubber mats shot 40 feet into the air. Rubble sped forth underneath them like fizz overflowing a glass of soda, while clouds of dust billowed into the sky. A muffled rumble could be heard in the distance.

When the air cleared, a pile of rock was all that was left of what had been a hill.

It was just another day, just another blast at the 144-acre work site.

Frazee, of Maine Drilling and Blasting, has overseen more than 100 blasts since the project started in early October. He'll oversee many more before what's being called one of the biggest earth-moving projects in Maine's history is finished.

"I've seen blasting projects of comparable size," said Frazee. "But not as big an earth-moving."

H.E. Sargent is the general contractor for the site work. When its crews are finished, 1.8 million cubic yards of earth will be rearranged to

level the distribution site — more than 138,000 loads in a conventional dump truck.

By comparison, the Maine Turnpike widening project moved 3.37 million cubic yards of earth stretched over more than 30 miles of highway.

The scale of the project is enormous. Wal-Mart is sinking \$60 million into the project. About 200 construction workers are on site at any given moment. For the first six weeks, the crews worked night and day.

Nearly 500 people are expected to be employed in the distribution center when it opens.

But for now, progress is measured in cubic yards of earth.

Bill Brackett of Ace Security has been watching that progress from his vantage point at the entrance to the site.

Does he see the landscape change?

"Yup, every 20 minutes."

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WHAT'S NEXT

Beginning now: building the dry goods warehouse

Fall 2005: The distribution center dry goods warehouse expected to be up and running

Spring 2005: Work begins on refrigeration warehouse

Fall 2006: Refrigeration warehouse expected to be operational

THE PLAYERS

People preparing the site for the distribution center

H.E. Sargent, Sillwater, Maine: General contractor for site work

W.H. Lane, Binghamton, N.Y.: General contractor for construction

Sub-contractors, to date: Maine Drilling and Blasting, Gardiner, Maine; Noble Plumbing, Melbourne, Fla.; Jay-Ton Construction, Burton, Tenn.; ES Soudki, Westbrook, Maine; Gendron/Gendron, Lewiston, Maine

Engineers: Carter and Burgess, Fort Worth, Texas

Architect: Kenneth Houghton of Carter and Burgess

INSIDE

BREAKING IT DOWN
It looks like the world's biggest sandbox, with huge equipment and dirt piles in every direction. To get a feel for the scope of the project — including price and payroll — turn the page and dig in.





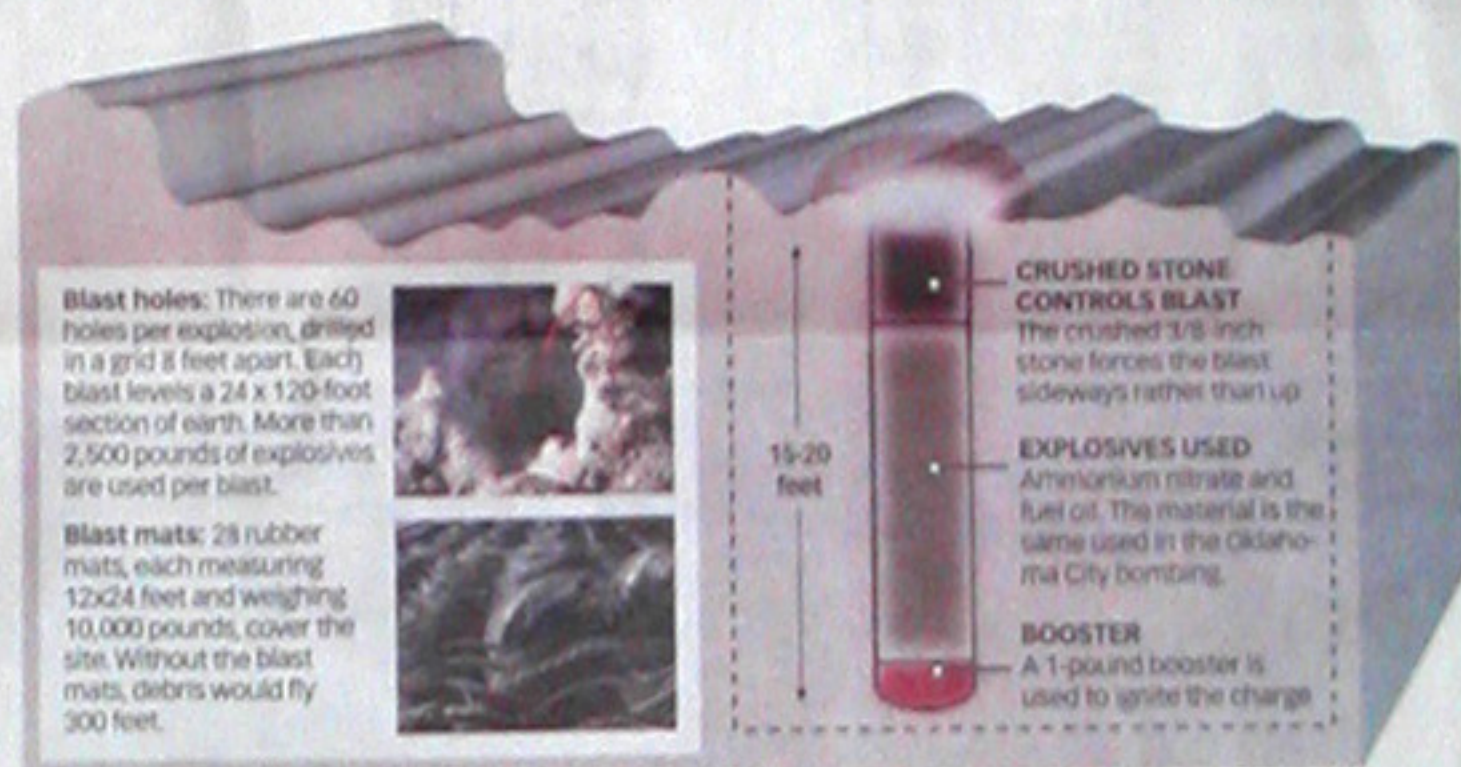
PHOTO BY JOHN LEE/USA TODAY

ROCK AND ROLL: The aftermath of the blast leaves a pile of boulders to be moved elsewhere on site. A backhoe fitted with a special ramming device breaks the boulders into smaller rocks.

THE BIG BANG

HOW THEY DO IT

Crews from Maine Drilling and Blasting spent more than six weeks leveling the Wal-Mart distribution center site with two blasts per day; now they're down to one. It takes workers 10 to 11 hours to drill the holes, three to four hours to fill with explosives and another hour to cover the blast site with mats.



GRAPHIC BY RYAN POWELL/USA TODAY



TOP LEFT: Piles of white dust mark each of the 60 drill holes that are wired to explode at the blast site.

LEFT: Wayne Flagg, a manager for Maine Drilling and Blasting, gets the signal moments before detonation.

BELOW: Dirt and boulders fly into the air during the blast.

