NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

Officials say Ground Zero cleanup enters final phase

The last of the rubble should be gone by summer

By SARA KUGLER
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Excavation of the World Trade Center ruins has entered its final phase as crews lay the foundation for a ramp that will allow recovery workers to remove the last of the rubble by summer.

Since the recovery effort began underground last month, workers have toiled in the pit that was once the trade center's seven-story basement. Hundreds of trucks carry rubble out of the crater each day, more than one million tons in all now.

The cleanup has been faster and cheaper than expected. A job that once was estimated to take at least a year is now predicted to be done by June. An expense initially thought to run as high as $7 billion is now expected to cost closer to $1 billion.

Contractors orchestrate the movements of about 800 workers at the site. As crews work around the clock to build the 500-foot-long metal ramp along the western edge of the pit, others whittle away at the ruins around it.

Crews expect to finish the ramp in about 10 weeks.

"Once we complete that, then we'll be able to do the final phase that will allow us to excavate the rest of the basement," said Kenneth Holden, commissioner of the city's Design and Development Corporation.

The new ramp will replace the two that are now on site — ramps made out of debris and topped with dirt. The debris, Holden said, "presumably contains remains."

After the cleanup shifted to areas below the fallen twin towers, pockets of victims' remains were found, many in stairwells and other spots that were partially protected as steel beams fell like pickup sticks.

At the foot of one of the muddy ramps, giant orange excavators claw through the ruins, setting down piles for firefighters to pick through with hand tools as they search for remains. Of the nearly 2,900 victims, 684 have been matched to remains by the medical examiner.

The city and work crews say the cleanup has gone faster than expected due to the 12-hour shifts and a prevailing attitude that victims' families deserve their relentless labor. Workers also credit the speedy progress to mild weather.

Still, they must pick through the debris 24 hours a day — when the rain pelts their hard hats or, like last weekend, when heavy flakes from the year's first snowfall coated their eyelashes.

"Don't anybody fall down, don't anybody get hurt tonight," cautioned a fire chief as a recent night shift began. The temperature dipped below 30 degrees on this evening, as crews worked in what would have been the area underneath the Marriott World Trade Center. Above their heads was the gaping mouth of a subway tunnel.

Scattered among unrecognizable debris were mundane and oddly untouched office items — a box of ball point pens, some spilling out, leaking blue ink into the ashy dirt. Papers peeked out of red file folders, flapping in the chilly breeze. A pink invoice that survived the fall from the 16th floor of the south tower listed a payment for $193.26.

Just west of this spot, the excavators have reached bedrock in an area about the size of a tennis court where a greenish pool of water has collected. Some of the water is from rain and melted snow and a bit has leaked from the Hudson river.

When the trade center was built, engineers filled a 3-foot-wide, 70-foot-deep trench along the western side of the site with a clay slurry to hold back the sludge and water from the river. The concrete slabs reinforcing the slurry wall were destroyed when the buildings collapsed, Holden said, but the mountain of debris actually provided support.

"As we take down and excavate the debris, we are lessening the lateral structural support, and need to put in these tieback anchors," Holden said.

A tieback is created by drilling a four-inch bunch of cables into a 30-foot hole at an angle through the slurry wall. Holden said workers have installed about a third of the 900 planned tiebacks into the wall.

The ground zero mantra from now until June is "remains recovery, excavation and tiebacks," Holden said.

During the next five months, Holden said, the biggest challenge will be coordinating the many operations beginning to creep back into the area, such as work to rebuild a damaged subway tunnel. The developer who holds the lease on the property has said he would like to build a group of smaller structures and not skyscrapers like the twin towers.

"As the site gets considered to be less and less a disaster area, and more and more a reconstruction area, what's happening is more and more people want to move back — which is great, as it should be," Holden said.

SI Advance 1·23·02

NYC-WTC_000141759