

Medical Campus and Clinic Site Carved out of the Bosom of Mother Earth

A site plan developed, multiple photos had been e-mailed, measurements taken, and innumerable messages transmitted – all in preparation for construction of the new Manos Amigas Clinic. At long last, the day finally arrived when Larry Zaugg, one of the engineers from Tech-Serve, came to La Entrada to start building this facility. Excitement was in the area as arrangements had been made ahead of time to view photos of the earth moving equipment necessary to prepare the campus for the first of its new buildings. Forget jet lag and the long and winding road trip from the airport to the Copan Region, because almost immediately upon Larry's arrival in town, he needed to make a quick tour of the region to inspect equipment and to see who had machinery that would be available the next morning. Fortunately, suitable earthmovers were in the area and he was able to begin reshaping the terrain and preparing the new campus.



Three things had to be accomplished during this first building phase – a new entrance from the main highway onto the property had to be constructed, a central boulevard needed to be created down the middle of the campus and proper drainage had to be established to make certain the clinic would not be flooded during the rainy season.

The first order of the day was to begin leveling the building site for the clinic, a task that was assumed to be easy, but it took a great deal of coordination and time. After all, no one from the US spoke Spanish and the hope was that “international” hand

signals and gestures among fellow engineers and equipment operators were universally understood!

Back at the hotel, there were several people who said they had given up on the clinic, because there was much initial talk and excitement, a bureaucracy to overcome and resignation we would eventually give up in defeat like leaders of other planned projects that failed to materialize since nothing happened for such a long time. Now, seeing a flurry of activity, there is belief and hope once again that this new campus with its first building will soon become a life changing reality for them.



Depth of Organic matter



When starting any earthmoving project, step one is to clear the area of vegetation and plant roots, saving as much topsoil as possible for use later in the project. A simple task you ask? Should be, because you set the blade of the bulldozer and off you go, but then again this is the tropics. So how deep could the top soil be? Would you believe a minimum of 18 inches? As we got into the groove of moving tons of soil and laser leveling the site, we actually had to carve out about five feet of soil from the highest point on the building site and move it to the lowest point.

From this soil profile picture, you can see the earth blackened organic zone on top at about shoulder height, made up of roots, decaying vegetation and fertile soil after decades of use as a pasture. The next 24 inches of brown zone was comprised of loose soil and some clay, below which could be found loose stone and some rock in the next zonal area.

As the vegetation was stripped and soil was moved, even the birds came to visit. Their brown and black plumage protected them from airborne predators, allowing them to blend in with the soil so you had to look closely to see them. These birds would alight on newly disturbed soil looking for insect larvae, root feeding grubs and any other meal-time invertebrates that would satisfy a hungry appetite. I couldn't help but think that these birds, just like some of the patients who come to our clinic, were struggling to find food simply to exist for another day.



Good Neighbors

As one day blended into the next and piles of dirt got moved from one location to another, people driving, bicycling or on foot would stop to ask what was happening here. They were excited to learn that a new medical facility would soon be in their neighborhood!



People from the impoverished hill country behind the site and neighbors on horseback came by daily to monitor our progress or to pass along advice. We quickly learned that there are lots of interests to be served with this new clinic – availability of equipment, construction supplies, gravel, jobs, medications, opening date and even concession stands.

Gravel at River

Look at almost any construction site in the US and you will see piles of sand, gravel, concrete sewer pipes, stacks of building blocks and lots of heavy equipment churning up clouds of dust. We would

simply get on the cell phone and call in all of the supplies like gravel from the local quarry along with heavy cement trucks with their rotating drums, constantly stirring their mix, and an army of yellow Tonka-like earth-moving trucks would soon be scurrying along the site – but not in Honduras! Circumstances are completely different here. You want what? To be delivered when?... Faster than *manana* because in 14 days you're on a plane headed home. This has got to be a “gringo” calling!

You would like to hear “*no problema*,” but you know that circumstances are difficult here. Your previous experiences tell you to expect things to be a challenge. There is no local quarry to call in the area, so you go to where the gravel is – to the river of course! People who own property along the river also own the gravel in the bed, so as soon as you find suitably sized gravel, you start to negotiate with them. That's the easy part. Afterwards you wade in, dig it up and truck it to the building site, and this takes equipment – another negotiation! As difficult as this might sound, things actually went smoothly and more quickly than anticipated.



After staking out the clinic, laser-leveling and compacting the dirt on the site, 90 truckloads of gravel were hauled in and spread out to form a strong drainage base for the clinic and to form a stabilized roadbed that will enable vehicles to drive up to the front portico as well as around the clinic and along what will eventually become a tree-line boulevard. The graveled skeleton for this part of the plan has already taken shape and soon after the rains come to aid soil compaction, footers for concrete supports to hold up the steel roof trusses and trenches to hold the plumbing and underground electrical wiring will be dug.