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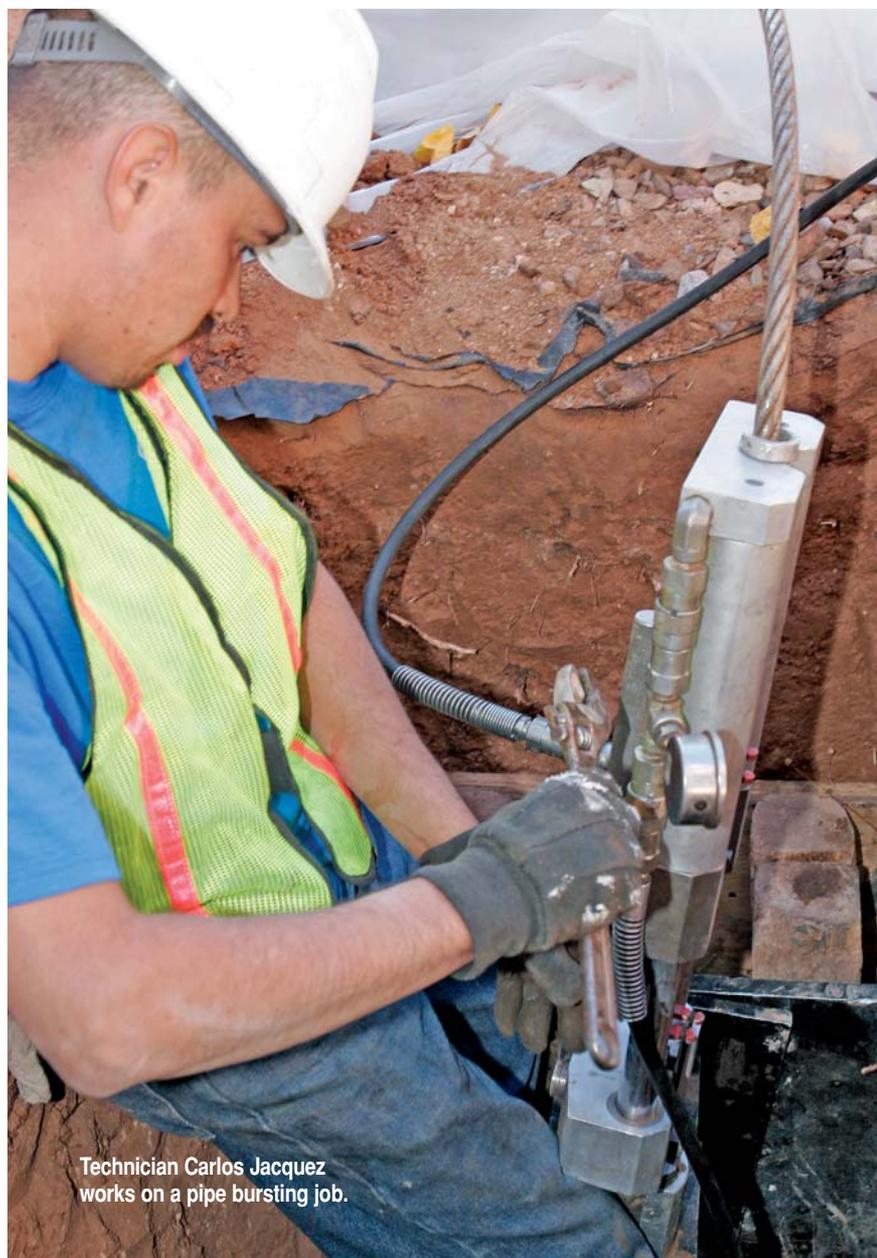
SEIZING AN OPPORTUNITY

DrainWorks diversifies into pipe bursting and finds a high-growth market niche in historic Santa Fe

By Marian Bond

After running a full-service plumbing shop for a short time, Chris Wilson saw a great opportunity to expand his business, DrainWorks, based in the historic city of Santa Fe, N.M.

Chris saw that no local companies offered trenchless processes for replacing sewer lines, even though the city had major environmental and architectural values to protect from the disruption of open-trench repair.



Technician Carlos Jacquez works on a pipe bursting job.

Chris decided that pipe bursting was the best trenchless method for the Santa Fe area, with its very old sewer lines of clay, concrete, and other less durable materials. He started with a second-hand pipe bursting system from TRIC Tools Inc.

“For our locality, re-lining was not an answer,” says Chris. “We needed to burst it to do the job right. We did our research, and once TRIC Tools got approved by the state, we made the purchase. We knew it would be a good investment, as we would be the first to offer the technology to customers.”

Taking off

The return on investment exceeded expectations. Chris and his wife, Jennifer, who handles the financial end of the business, saw the business realize 100 percent growth in the first three years of providing pipe bursting. Their customers are homeowners, commercial clients, and other plumbers who subcontract the technology. The Wilsons estimate that pipe bursting accounts for up to 70 percent of their business. “I initially figured it would be maybe 20 percent,” says Chris.

Advertising played a major role in the growth. At Jennifer’s suggestion, the firm developed a 30-second, cable TV commercial in which two technicians describe the pipe-bursting process. The results have been impressive, and Yellow Pages advertising also has been highly successful. “I truly am a believer in advertising,” says Chris. “We literally had a business overnight.”

Trenchless sewer line replacement in



DrainWorks employee Carlos Jacquez works on a segment of pipe that will cap off an old junction between the sewer main and the pipe running from a home.

Santa Fe is important for several reasons: “We live in a desert area,” says Chris. “We don’t want to be tearing up a yard, because it takes so long to grow grass, and we don’t want to be cutting down trees.

“Our soil is very rocky, and it is clay soil in some places. We have a lot of river rock, and there are historic areas where we just don’t want to be digging. We could be excavating an area and discover sensitive places that would require us to stop and call in archeologists. It is highly desirable to be able to replace a sewer line with trenchless technology, and pipe bursting is our preferred method.”

It has been fairly simple to show home and business owners that pipe

PROFILE

DRAINWORKS SANTA FE, N.M.



OWNER:	Chris and Jennifer Wilson
SERVICES:	Plumbing, heating and cooling, pipe bursting
YEARS IN BUSINESS:	6
EMPLOYEES:	10
WEB SITE:	www.drainworks.net



Above, DrainWorks supervisor Chris Lopez works with a portable grinder on a residential sewer lateral as part of a pipe bursting project. At right, Carlos Jacquez uses a fishline to help pull the bursting unit cable through the old pipe.



bursting enables repair of sewer lines without digging up the property.

Training for trenchless

It was also relatively easy for Chris and Jennifer to get their people up to speed. Technical support representatives from TRIC Tools were available to answer questions and to troubleshoot situations new to DrainWorks employees. A TRIC representative also spent a day going over various situations the teams might encounter. All 10 employees now know how to use the system.

“They were very professional and helpful,” says Chris. “For one of our first jobs, we had TRIC Tools come out. We

“I truly am a believer in advertising. We literally had a business overnight.”

Chris Wilson

were on Canyon Road, in a popular tourist area with a lot of art galleries. We were to replace the sewer line, and we had to pull from the back of the building, underneath a gallery floor to the city sewer.

“If we had excavated the old way, the gallery would have been shut down for days. We did it smoothly in three hours, and saved the customer at least \$12,000. This is a very exclusive area. Everybody was watching what we were doing. On another job in Santa Fe, in an exclusive part of town, we pulled under four lanes of traffic from a parking lot to a building.”

No doubt the success of these and similar projects helped spread the word about DrainWorks and pipe bursting. On another project, a crew digging a pothole for a sewer line replacement discovered some pre-Columbian materials.

“If we had been excavating to replace the sewer line, we would have had to get archeologists involved,” says Chris. “In fact, we have won some awards for helping to preserve Santa Fe because our technology allows us to go underneath these historical materials.”

The system itself can handle pipe replacements up to 150 feet long, but it also works in smaller increments.

What makes for profit

Several factors make pipe bursting a profitable venture, but the primary benefit is speed. The technology can replace a sewer line in as little as a few hours, versus days for standard trenching. A customer calls DrainWorks with a backed-up sewer. A crew is on site the same or the following day (DrainWorks operates around-the-clock).

“What makes it all profitable is having experienced technicians — people who are good communicators,” says Chris. “It all plays into the profit picture. The people who work for us are very good at their jobs. They are very professional, and they know the equipment. I can’t stress enough how important it is to

Trenchless on the Job

Excavating to replace a sewer line is almost a thing of the past, says Chris Wilson, who estimates that his company, DrainWorks, does perhaps one excavating job per month. All others are done with trenchless technology.

The rare jobs that require trenching are generally cases where utility lines are too close to the pipe, or where the customer prefers conventional digging. Before DrainWorks offered pipe bursting, the company did numerous open-trench projects. Now, the firm spends less time and labor and earns more money — while saving dollars for customers.

A typical pipe-bursting job requires a crew leader and two or three helpers. Crews travel as far as Albuquerque — 60 to 70 miles away. Chris notes that technicians return from bursting jobs feeling good about the process, and knowing that they have done their work efficiently, while protecting the landscape and archeological character of Santa Fe.

After the company adds a second pipe-bursting system, Chris expects to do at least eight jobs per week. His advice for those contemplating trenchless technology is to deal with a reputable company that will be there with service, spare parts, and advice when needed.



From left, Carlos Jacquez, Chris Lopez and Maximo Herrera prepare the hydraulic pipe bursting power pack for a pull.



Maximo Herrera guides new polybutylene pipe through the old lateral pipe.

“Once we got into pipe bursting, we found that we rarely use the full-size backhoe. Nobody wants to take it out. Now we use the Komatsu track hoe for excavating entry and exit pits for pipe bursting.”

Chris Wilson

have these people on our crew.”

The technicians follow a simple dress code: blue polo shirts with the company logo, and blue jeans. Chris has structured his company to be a good place to work. He offers rewards for good performance.

The company retains a diverse business, operating four Ford extended vans, a one-ton Ford box truck, one Ford and one Chevrolet utility truck, a Freightliner pump truck and dump truck, three UEMSI cameras, a Harben waterjetter, a backhoe, and a track hoe.

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track hoe for excavating entry and exit pits for pipe bursting.”

A year-round business

The weather in the Santa Fe area does not seem to set the business cycle for pipe bursting. Chris observes that the service seems to be in highest demand from October through July. It slows a little in August and September. “If it’s cold out there, we just bundle up and go about our business.”

Summer or winter, day or night, pipe bursting is helping DrainWorks to stay on a profitable track, while helping to preserve the scenic and environmental resources of one of the nation’s landmark cities. ■

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