



Sergey Chaban, President of Professional Horizontal Drilling LLC.



On a project in Bothell, Washington, crew members install one 4-inch HDPE (high-density polyethylene) pipe as a sleeve for a 2-inch sewer force main crossing a creek.

# MAKING A WAY

## Professional Horizontal Drilling takes unknown out of underground work

by Steve Freeman

Successfully navigating through unseen territory is both a business mantra and a real-life quest for brothers Sergey and Oleg Chaban.

Together, they run *Professional Horizontal Drilling LLC* (PHD), a subcontractor offering services in Washington and Oregon to perform the digging required for installing electric, sewer, water and communications utilities underground.

It's what lies beneath the ground and runs up to a home or business that gives the structure functionality, creature comforts and even operational power. The Chabans operate their company—based north of Seattle in Mill Creek, Washington—with crews experienced at making a way for utility companies, municipalities and construction contractors to extend or repair utilities and not damage what can be a maze of existing underground systems. The work is

especially important in the Pacific Northwest, a place known for its natural beauty and citizens' awareness of protecting the environment.

PHD specializes in directional boring. Its skilled crews and sophisticated equipment can bore 90 feet deep and 700 feet in horizontal distance (more than twice the distance of a football field) to install underground utilities. This minimizes the need for costly and unsightly asphalt patching, concrete panel replacement or landscaping restoration. Plus, it avoids the need for digging a trench when a crossing is required at railroad tracks, a creek, a wetland area or a freeway.

### BREAKING GROUND

The Chaban brothers immigrated to the U.S. from Russia/Ukraine 20 years ago, faced with unknowns and uncertain of what the future held, but in search of the American Dream.

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The company's crew gets ready to install underground utility conduits in downtown Seattle.

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Sergey, the older brother, found himself in the custodial business but was unfulfilled there. He aspired to be more and always felt that he would be a good company leader if given the opportunity.

Eight years later, the opportunity arrived. He met the owner of a directional boring company who desired to leave the business and sell his equipment. The idea seemed inconceivable at first, but with the brothers working together, they saw the possibilities come true.

"We wanted the American Dream and took out a loan to get it. We were young and took the risk," says Sergey, who now serves as President of PHD.

The year was 2007 and coincidentally the same year that state and local municipalities throughout the nation inaugurated the "Call Before You Dig" service. By calling a

regionally based 811 phone number as required by law in the state of Washington, a contractor or homeowner can obtain exact locations of underground utilities in a timely manner. While there are clear advantages to putting utilities underground—such as aesthetics, reducing maintenance and mitigating disruptions caused by natural disasters—the web of subsurface conduits pulsating underneath cities and communities has made 21st century infrastructure work very challenging.

"We saw a need in the construction industry, we looked around and nobody was doing it. That's all," Sergey says.

## **FROM HERE TO THERE**

PHD has 17 employees divided into three crews, plus those who manage the head office. Two crews serve Washington and one crew handles Oregon; Sergey hopes to add one crew to each state this year.

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Sergey Chaban, President,  
Professional Horizontal Drilling LLC

Crew members go through six months of training to optimize safety, job performance and even human relations and communications. The company closely watches safety and regulatory guidelines, including comprehensive changes to the Underground Utilities Damage Prevention Act, the “dig law” enacted in 2011 and implemented in 2013 in Washington state.

Two-thirds of PHD’s business is for communication companies, including Comcast, AT&T and Verizon. Their work is especially unique in situations where the project involves crossing a highway or a creek.

The workers operate Ditch Witch directional drilling machines. Based on the information from the 811 call, they dig a pothole to discover the actual horizontal and vertical locations of existing underground utilities.

Each crew also uses a vacuum excavation system that extracts earth using water pressure instead of cutting and digging equipment, which could possibly break utility lines. A trailer is used to collect up to 800 gallons at a time. The company transports what’s extracted to an approved refuse collector to mitigate any environmental concerns.

### THROUGH AND THROUGH

The Chaban brothers work deliberately to take care of their crew members,

the companies they serve and even the general public, whose activities will possibly be affected by digging.

They buy lunch for employees at least once a week and take great interest in integrating and, thus, retaining good employees—several of which have been with them for 10 years.

“It’s not just digging a hole in the ground,” Sergey says. “It’s pleasing customers and valuing employees.”

The project should come off without a flaw, so the next contractor can do his job. A nearby resident or business owner might see the PHD crew one day and forget about them after that. PHD works quickly and cleans up thoroughly.

Day after day, PHD expertly bores through earth so that the utility crews that follow can optimize their own installations or repairs, thereby pleasing the property owners. The best compliment that Sergey likes to hear is that his crew was unnoticed or that when the company that hired PHD performs the quality control check, they can’t even see where PHD dug the entry/exit bore pits. 🦉

*As a communications professor and a reporter and editor for decades, Steve Freeman enjoys telling the stories of fascinating companies.*



Workers in Bothell, Washington, installing communication conduits.