



Property Manager's Quick Guide

Exterior Cleaning Methods Compared
An objective comparison for Ontario commercial properties

Prepared by UPWASH Drone+ | March 2026

Randall Mendez, Owner & Chief Drone Pilot

This document is an educational resource, not a sales proposal. It compares six exterior cleaning methods on their merits. Where drone cleaning is not the right answer, this guide says so.



1 How to Use This Guide

If your building needs exterior cleaning, you have six realistic options: ground-level pressure washing (including water-fed pole systems), scaffolding with manual washing, rope access, boom lifts, swing stages, or drone-based cleaning. Each has legitimate strengths. Each has real limitations. Anyone who tells you one option is universally better than the others is selling you something.

This guide presents each method on its merits, with Ontario-specific cost ranges, regulatory requirements, safety data, and disruption profiles. It is designed to help you make an informed decision — or to ask better questions of whichever contractor you ultimately choose.

UPWASH Drone+ is a drone-based exterior cleaning company. We wrote this guide, and we are transparent about that. We also believe the best way to earn your trust is to give you accurate information about every option — including the ones that compete with us. Where drone cleaning is not the right answer for your building, this guide says so directly.

2 Method Comparison at a Glance

The following table summarizes key metrics for a typical 15-storey commercial tower with approximately 58,000 sq ft of facade in Southern Ontario. Cost ranges reflect 2026 market conditions.

Metric	Ground-Level / WFP	Scaffolding	Swing Stage	Rope Access	Boom Lift	Drone Cleaning
Cost / sq ft	\$0.15–\$0.60	\$0.65–\$1.90	\$0.40–\$1.15	\$0.40–\$1.15	\$0.50–\$1.50	From \$0.25
Typical total (15-storey)	Limited to 8–9 storeys	\$46K–\$145K	\$23K–\$65K	\$23K–\$70K	\$29K–\$87K	From ~\$14.5K
Equipment rental	Pole: \$900–\$2,500 (capital)	\$1.80/sq ft/mo (frame systems)	\$400–\$1,200/wk (single to 2-tier)	Per technician hourly rate	\$1,050–\$2,400/wk	Included in project price
Setup time	Minutes	Days to weeks	4–8 hours	2–3 hours	Hours	15–45 min
Project duration (15-storey)	N/A at this height	2–6 weeks	7–9 days	5–8 days	5–10 days	2–5 days
Crew size	1–2	4–8	2–4	2 (min.)	2–4	2–3
Workers at height?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Max reach	~90 ft (27 m)	Unlimited	Unlimited	Unlimited	~135 ft (41 m)	~190 ft (58 m)
Cleaning level	Maintenance	Maintenance to restoration	Maintenance to restoration	Maintenance to restoration	Maintenance to restoration	Maintenance
Disruption	Minimal	High	Moderate (hoist noise; blocks light)	Moderate (privacy)	Moderate	Low
Permit required?	Rarely	Almost always	Frequent	Varies	Often	Airspace only

Sources: Industry contractor data, Ontario rental market rates, and manufacturer specifications. Drone cost data reflects UPWASH Drone+ pricing — see transparency note in Section 14.



Ground-Level Methods: A Closer Look

The main table groups all ground-level methods under one column. In practice, water-fed poles, pressure washing, and soft washing are distinct methods with different applications, risks, and limitations.

Metric	Water-Fed Pole (WFP)	Pressure Washing	Soft Washing
Mechanism	Deionized water + brush agitation via telescopic pole	High-pressure water (1,500–4,000 PSI)	Low-pressure chemical application (<500 PSI)
Primary use	Glass and smooth surfaces	Concrete, sidewalks, loading docks	EIFS, stucco, painted surfaces, biological growth
Effective reach	~90 ft theoretical; ~50–60 ft practical	~40 ft (3 storeys) from ground wand	~40 ft (3 storeys) from ground wand
Chemical required?	No — DI water only	Typically no	Yes — sodium hypochlorite or surfactant blend
Facade risk	Frame leaching on older buildings; spotting on hydrophobic coatings	Can etch stone, cause zebra striping on wood, force water through seals	Low when correctly diluted; requires runoff containment
Biological kill?	Displacement only — does not kill at root	Displacement only	Yes — kills algae, mould, and bacteria at root
Fall risk	None	None	None
Best for buildings	Under 5 storeys (standard glass)	Ground-level hardscape only — not facades	Under 3 storeys (delicate substrates)
Key limitation	70% speed loss above 5th floor; leverage and pressure fail	Damages most facade materials; wind drift above 3 storeys	Reach limited to ~40 ft; requires containment and neutralization for runoff

For buildings above 5 storeys requiring chemical treatment (soft wash), elevated access — whether by scaffolding, rope, boom lift, or drone — is required to deliver the solution effectively. Ground-level spray application at those heights loses precision to wind drift and gravity.



3 Ground-Level Pressure Washing & Water-Fed Poles

What it is: Ground-level cleaning uses pressure washers or water-fed pole (WFP) systems operated by a technician standing at ground level. Modern high-modulus carbon fiber poles can reach up to 90 feet (approximately 27 metres), extending this method's viability to buildings of 8 to 9 storeys. WFP systems use deionized water — stripped of all mineral content — which acts as a powerful solvent that attracts and encapsulates particulate matter without chemical detergents. This is called the “hungry water” principle: water at zero parts per million total dissolved solids actively pulls contamination from surfaces.

Best suited for: Low-rise commercial buildings under 8 storeys with standard glass and relatively simple facade geometry. Retail plazas, strip malls, small office buildings, and ground-floor storefronts. Particularly effective on buildings where the entire facade can be reached from ground level.

Strengths: Zero fall risk — the technician's feet never leave the ground, bypassing the entire Working at Heights regulatory framework under Ontario's O. Reg. 213/91. Lowest setup friction of any method: truck-mounted rigs can begin cleaning within minutes of arrival. In London, Ontario, this method eliminates the Work Approval Permit process and associated fees required for street occupancy. Negligible disruption to building operations. No chemical detergents required for routine soiling.

Limitations — what contractors may not tell you:

While WFP systems eliminate fall risk, they have absolute physical and ergonomic ceilings that property managers should understand before procurement. While manufacturers market 80–90 foot reach, real-world field data suggests a significant efficiency ceiling at the 5th floor (approximately 50–60 feet). Beyond that point, every limitation below compounds.

1. The physics of torque and leverage. At extended reaches of 60–90 feet, the pole acts as a long lever. A 6.5 lb brush head on a 40-foot pole held at 60 degrees requires approximately 130 ft-lbs of torque to hold steady — and this load increases substantially as the pole extends toward its 90-foot limit. The result: effective scrubbing power becomes almost non-existent at height because the operator cannot apply sufficient horizontal pressure against the glass without the pole bowing or bouncing. Above 65 feet, even a light breeze can cause the brush head to “whip” off the glass surface.

Critically, to gain enough leverage to clean a 7th-storey window, an operator must stand 20–30 feet back from the building facade. If the property has narrow sidewalks, parked cars, mature landscaping, or fencing, the operator cannot achieve the necessary angle. Without this standoff distance, the brush simply skims the surface, failing to remove embedded contaminants.

2. Hydraulic failure at height. Standard municipal water pressure (approximately 60 PSI) loses roughly 0.43–0.50 PSI per foot of vertical elevation. At a height of 80 feet, the system loses approximately 40 PSI. After accounting for filter friction in the DI/RO system, the flow at the brush head becomes a trickle — insufficient for the “curtain of water” needed for effective rinsing. For any WFP work above 60 feet, a booster pump is mandatory.

3. Surface sensitivity and “the dirty drip.” WFP cleaning depends on water “sheeting” cleanly off the glass. Three scenarios create visible problems:

Frame leaching: On older or poorly maintained buildings, deionized water draws dirt and old detergent residue out of window seals and frame vents. This contamination continues to drip onto the glass for hours after the cleaner has left, causing visible white streaks that only appear after the contractor is gone.

Hydrophobic glass: Modern coatings cause water to bead into droplets rather than sheeting. On upper storeys where rinsing precision is lower, these beads trap airborne dust as they dry, leaving persistent spots.

Heritage glass: WFP is often inappropriate for heritage buildings — nylon bristles can disturb brittle decorative lead or structural lead panels in churches and period properties.

4. Speed degradation and productivity. While WFP is 50–60% faster than traditional mop-and-squeegee methods at ground level, speed degrades significantly with height. Fighting the flex and whip of a 65-foot pole in even a light breeze (>15 km/h) drops productivity by nearly 70% compared to lower floors.



Metric	WFP Low-Rise (<5 Storeys)	WFP High-Reach (6–9 Storeys)
Cleaning quality	Consistent / High	Low (limited by flex and leverage)
Speed	~100 sq ft / minute	~30 sq ft / minute
Operator fatigue	Moderate	Extreme (shoulder / neck strain)
Weather limit	Standard	Reschedules at >15 km/h wind
Brush control	Precise	Subject to whip and flex
Water requirement	Standard DI system	Booster pump mandatory

5. Occupational health risks. Approximately 40% of employees in the sector suffer from “Window Cleaner’s Shoulder” and chronic neck strain due to sustained vertical looking for 4–6 hours per day. These ergonomic injuries are not reflected in WSIB rate codes the same way fall-from-height injuries are, but they represent a real occupational health cost.

Legionella risk: Stagnant water in poorly maintained DI/RO filters can become a breeding ground for Legionella bacteria, which is then aerosolized by the brush jets. Operators should maintain documented filter maintenance and flushing schedules.

Electrical conductivity: Carbon fiber is highly conductive. Operators must maintain a 10-foot Minimum Approach Distance (MAD) from overhead power lines, which can further restrict access in urban centres with overhead wiring.

Ontario cost context: \$0.15–\$0.60 per sq ft depending on building access and soiling severity. High-modulus carbon fiber poles represent a significant capital investment (\$900–\$2,500+ per unit), reflected in contractor pricing at the higher end of this range.

Bottom line: WFP is the best option for buildings under 5 storeys with standard glass and accessible facades. It is safe, fast, and low-cost at those heights. Between 5 and 8 storeys, performance degrades significantly — speed drops 70%, scrubbing power diminishes, and wind sensitivity increases. Above 60 feet, the physics of leverage, water pressure loss, and ergonomic strain create real performance limitations that should factor into method selection. The 90-foot theoretical maximum is not the same as 90 feet of effective cleaning.

Pressure Washing vs. Soft Washing: A Critical Distinction

Property managers should understand that “pressure washing” and “soft washing” are fundamentally different methods with different applications and risks:

Pressure washing uses high mechanical force (1,500–4,000 PSI). While effective for concrete sidewalks and loading docks, it is generally unsuitable for building facades. High-pressure water can etch natural stone, cause “zebra striping” on wood surfaces, force water through failed window seals into occupied spaces, and accelerate deterioration of aging mortar joints.

Soft washing uses low pressure (<500 PSI) combined with biodegradable cleaning solutions (typically sodium hypochlorite-based algaecides). This is the industry standard for delicate surfaces including EIFS, stucco, and painted facades. Soft washing kills biological growth at the root rather than simply displacing it.

Reach limits for ground-based application: Whether pressure washing or soft washing, ground-based wands rarely reach beyond 40 feet (3 storeys) effectively. At greater heights, wind disperses the spray stream, leading to uneven application and chemical drift onto unintended surfaces. This is why elevated access — whether by scaffolding, rope, boom lift, or drone — is required for mid-rise and high-rise buildings.



4 Pressure Washing

What it is: High-pressure water (1,500–4,000 PSI) applied via a ground-based wand or lance to blast contamination from surfaces through mechanical force alone.

Best suited for: Ground-level hardscape only — concrete sidewalks, loading docks, parking structures, retaining walls. Not appropriate for building facades.

Strengths: Fast and effective on concrete and masonry at ground level. No chemicals required for most applications. Equipment is widely available and relatively inexpensive.

Limitations: High-pressure water can etch natural stone, cause “zebra striping” on wood surfaces, force water through failed window seals into occupied spaces, and accelerate deterioration of aging mortar joints. Ground-based wands rarely reach beyond 40 feet (3 storeys) effectively — at greater heights, wind disperses the stream, leading to uneven application. Not suitable for EIFS, stucco, or any delicate facade material. The high mechanical force can damage sealants, push moisture behind cladding, and dislodge loose mortar — creating the very maintenance problems the cleaning was intended to prevent.

Critical distinction: Pressure washing is a ground-level hardscape method, not a facade cleaning method. When a contractor proposes “pressure washing” your building exterior, verify whether they mean true high-pressure application (which risks facade damage) or soft washing at low pressure (which is appropriate for delicate substrates).

Ontario cost: \$0.15–\$0.45/sq ft for ground-level hardscape.

5 Soft Washing

What it is: Low-pressure application (<500 PSI) of biodegradable cleaning solutions — typically sodium hypochlorite-based algaecides or surfactant blends — to kill biological growth at the root and dissolve atmospheric soiling without mechanical force.

Best suited for: Delicate facade materials under 3 storeys — EIFS, stucco, painted surfaces, vinyl siding. The industry standard for biological growth (algae, mould, *Gloeocapsa magma*) on surfaces that cannot tolerate high pressure.

Strengths: Kills biological growth at the cellular level rather than simply displacing it — results last significantly longer than pressure washing or WFP cleaning. Low mechanical force protects delicate substrates. Effective on organic staining that DI water alone cannot remove. The chemical dwell time does the work, not pressure — meaning less risk of substrate damage.

Limitations: Ground-based application limited to ~40 feet (3 storeys) — wind disperses the chemical stream at greater heights, causing drift onto unintended surfaces, vehicles, and landscaping. Requires full runoff containment and neutralization under Ontario EPA, Fisheries Act, and municipal sewer bylaws. Sodium hypochlorite at working concentration (typically 0.5–1.5%) must be neutralized before any discharge to storm sewers. Not a zero-chemical method — Safety Data Sheets required. Operators must carry environmental liability insurance.

For buildings above 3 storeys requiring soft wash treatment: elevated access is required to deliver the chemical solution effectively. Drone-based cleaning is the only method that can apply soft-wash formulas at heights up to 190 feet without ground-level angle and wind-drift limitations — filling the critical gap between where ground-level application fails and where the biological growth actually lives.

Ontario cost: \$0.20–\$0.55/sq ft for low-rise application.



6 Scaffolding & Manual Washing

What it is: Scaffolding provides a stable, multi-technician work platform erected against the building facade. It is the only method that supports heavy restoration work: grinding, recoating, panel replacement, and multi-trade access to the same facade section.

Best suited for: Stage 3 facade restoration. Heritage buildings requiring close-up tactile assessment and conservation-grade work. Multi-trade projects.

Strengths: Unlimited height. Stable, multi-worker platform allows heavy mechanical work. Can support simultaneous trades. The only appropriate option when a building needs structural rehabilitation.

Limitations: Setup takes days to weeks. Rental runs approximately \$1.80/sq ft/month for basic frame systems. Engineering assessment required for configurations exceeding 15 metres (O. Reg. 213/91), adding \$1,500–\$2,500 before cleaning begins. Extended presence creates a security concern — scaffolding functions as an unmonitored ladder system attached to your building for the project duration. Daily competent-person inspections are mandatory.

Under O. Reg. 480/24, extended scaffolding projects trigger additional sanitation mandates: documented washroom cleaning records, AED requirements for projects exceeding three months with 20+ workers, and electronic log accessibility for Ministry of Labour inspectors. These add administrative overhead that should be factored into project planning.

Toronto permit costs (2026): Application fee \$1,022.72; scaffolding occupation \$34.60/lineal metre/month; sidewalk occupation \$11.53/sq metre/month; roadway occupation \$101.95–\$255.48/sq metre/month depending on zone. Full lane closures in Toronto's designated Construction Hubs cost \$1,117.53 per day. A 20-metre downtown sidewalk scaffold for three months can accrue over \$5,000 in permit fees alone. In London: \$150 application fee plus \$100/day extension penalties for timeline overruns.



7 Rope Access (Abseiling)

What it is: Technicians descend on two independent ropes, governed by O. Reg. 859 (Window Cleaning). Rope access offers the lowest equipment footprint of any elevated access method and minimal ground-level disruption, making it ideal for occupied residential condos with balconies or irregular facades. IRATA or SPRAT certification is required.

Best suited for: High-rise towers with glass curtain walls. Buildings requiring tactile inspection — detailed sealant assessment, manual scrubbing, or close-up structural evaluation. Any situation where a technician needs to physically feel whether a tile is loose, a sealant has failed, or a panel is delaminated.

Strengths: Unlimited height. Hands-on mechanical scrubbing and tactile feedback that no other method can match. Relatively fast setup (2–3 hours) compared to scaffolding. Moderate cost (\$0.40–\$1.15/sq ft for a 15-storey building). Lowest visual and spatial impact of any elevated method — no ground-level hoarding required.

Limitations: Human risk is inherent. Mandatory two-person safety protocol — one working, one monitoring — effectively doubles labour cost per working technician. Technician billing rates in Ontario run \$150–\$360/hour. Building owners are legally required to maintain Professional-Engineer-verified anchor point sketches with annual inspections (O. Reg. 859). Wind above 40 km/h generally halts operations. Project timelines of 5–8 days for a 15-storey building, with significant tenant privacy disruption from workers visible outside windows for extended periods.

Labour shortage context: BuildForce Canada projects Ontario will face a shortfall of approximately 51,900 construction workers by 2034, with roughly 90,300 workers (19% of the current labour force) expected to retire in the next decade. Each IRATA or SPRAT certification level costs approximately \$2,000 in training, and Working at Heights certification must be renewed every three years. The qualified labour pool for rope access is shrinking as demand grows.

Rescue plan requirement: Suspension trauma (orthostatic intolerance) can become fatal in as little as 15 to 30 minutes. OHS standards require that fall arrest systems permit a worker to remain suspended safely for at least 30 minutes. Contractors must have on-site rescue equipment — not just a call to 911.



8 Swing Stages (Suspended Scaffolds)

What it is: Multi-worker platforms suspended from roof-mounted davit arms or outrigger beams, governed by O. Reg. 859 (Window Cleaning). The industrial workhorse for uniform curtain walls — swing stages provide a stable platform for multiple workers operating simultaneously at the same elevation. They are the dominant method for large-scale high-rise glass cleaning on buildings with flat, repetitive facades.

Best suited for: High-rise buildings with flat, repetitive curtain walls where extended working time at each level is needed. Projects requiring multiple workers at the same height simultaneously. Buildings with existing permanent davit arms or outrigger beam infrastructure on the roof.

Strengths: Stable multi-worker platform at height. Efficient for large, uniform glass facades where the same cleaning procedure repeats across hundreds of identical panels. Can support cleaning equipment and materials at height. No ground-level staging footprint (suspended from roof).

Limitations: More imposing for tenants than rope access — hoist noise disrupts occupants and the platform blocks natural light during operation. Requires significant ground-level hoarding and pedestrian protection zones. Building owners must maintain PE-verified anchor point sketches with annual inspections (O. Reg. 859) — a recurring legal obligation whether swing stages are used once per year or continuously. Seven suspended platform fatalities at heights >20m were recorded in Ontario (IHSA CDR 2025).

Swing Stage Rental and Rigging Costs (2026)

Swing Stage Type	Weekly Rate (CAD)	Monthly Rate (CAD)
Single-Line Basket	\$400–\$600	\$1,400–\$1,800
Double-Line System	\$500–\$750	\$1,600–\$2,200
Multi-Motor Platform	\$750–\$1,000	\$2,000–\$3,500
2-Tier Stage System	\$900–\$1,200	\$2,500–\$4,000

The full cost picture: Rigging and professional installation: \$1,500–\$3,500 per mobilization depending on building configuration. Dismantling matches installation cost (effectively doubled). Height surcharge: ~\$100 per additional 100 ft above 10 storeys. Equipment-only daily cost for short-term usage: \$500–\$2,000. Complete swing stage system purchase: \$27,000–\$35,000 (cost-effective only for projects exceeding 12 months). Cost per sq ft: \$0.40–\$1.15. Total project cost for a 15-storey tower: \$23,000–\$65,000.



9 Boom Lifts & Aerial Work Platforms

What it is: Boom lifts — including telescopic and articulating models — provide a stable elevated platform without requiring permanent roof anchors. Models range from 30-foot electric units to 135-foot diesel telescopic machines.

Best suited for: Mid-rise buildings with accessible ground-level staging and no overhead obstructions. Surgical repair work where close-up manual access is needed but roof anchors are unavailable.

Strengths: Faster deployment than scaffolding (hours, not weeks). Stable work platform. No permanent roof anchor infrastructure required. Good mobility around accessible facades.

Limitations: Site-specific constraints are non-negotiable. A 125-foot boom lift weighs approximately 44,000 lbs and requires firm, level ground with full outrigger clearance. Overhead wires, mature landscaping, underground utilities, and narrow sidewalks can eliminate the option entirely. Underground parking structures present a critical risk: most standard parking garage slabs are engineered for residential vehicle loads (40–50 psf), not 44,000-lb machines. Staging without a slab engineering assessment and GPR (Ground Penetrating Radar) scan risks structural collapse or roof membrane puncture.

Type	Reach	Weekly Rental	Toronto Hub Permit
Electric Articulating	30–45 ft	\$1,050–\$1,350	\$92.35/day + HST
Diesel Articulating	40–60 ft	\$1,200–\$1,700	\$92.35/day + HST
High-Reach Telescopic	100–135 ft	\$1,800–\$2,400	\$92.35/day + HST

Note: Ontario One Call locate request required before deployment. London Work Approval Permit requires a stamped Traffic Control Plan (Ontario Traffic Manual, Book 7).



10 Drone-Based Exterior Cleaning

What it is: A remotely piloted drone delivers pressurized water and cleaning solutions to the building facade while all operators remain at ground level. The system is tethered — a lightweight hose runs from a ground station to the drone, providing water and chemical delivery via an adjustable pressure washer pump system.

Best suited for: Routine maintenance cleaning on mid-rise commercial buildings (4–17 storeys). Buildings where minimizing disruption to tenants and operations is a priority. Properties where fall risk elimination matters — occupied offices, healthcare facilities, residential units.

Strengths: Zero workers at height. Setup in 15–45 minutes. Two to three person crew. Minimal ground footprint. Pressure is calibrated to each facade material before cleaning begins. Cleaning speed of approximately 300 square feet per minute — roughly five times faster than manual methods for routine maintenance. Drone-based cleaning is the only method that can deliver specialized soft-wash chemical formulas to heights of up to 190 feet without the angle, reach, and wind-drift limitations of ground-level spray application.

The honest limitation that most drone companies won't volunteer: Drone cleaning delivers maintenance-level results, not restoration-level results. The Valcourt Group — one of North America's most respected high-rise maintenance firms — states that drone cleaning achieves up to 80% of the effectiveness of traditional hands-on methods. Drones cannot mechanically scrub a surface. They cannot feel whether a tile is loose or a sealant has failed. They are not appropriate for deep restoration, historic conservation, or heavily embedded contamination.

Additional limitations: Sustained wind >16 km/h and wind gusts >30 km/h pauses operations. Complex facade geometry with deep recesses may limit access. Rain and snow ground all operations.

Regulatory framework: Requires an **Advanced Operations Pilot Certificate** from Transport Canada to fly a cleaning drone with a valid Safety Assurance Declaration (Section 922) to allow for flight in controlled airspace (922.04), near people <30m, >5m (922.05), and over people <5m (922.06). Sheltered Operation (SOR/2025-70) permits operations without a direct line of sight or additional spotters to operate in complex building exteriors. Tethered hose operations comply with CAR 901.43(1)(d) without requiring a Special Flight Operations Certificate. Cleaning solutions at working dilution, classified as non-hazardous under GHS or WHMIS, do not require additional authorization from Transport Canada.



11 Safety: Ontario Fall-from-Height Data

Fall-from-height incidents remain the leading cause of workplace fatalities in Ontario construction. The data below reflects the regulatory environment in which every exterior cleaning decision is made.

Statistic	Data	Source
Fall fatalities, Ontario construction (2009–2024)	131	IHSA Construction Death Review, 2025
Suspended platform fatalities included in above (heights >20 m)	7	Ontario Ministry of Labour data
Maximum corporate fine per WAH offence	\$2,000,000	OHSA 2026
Maximum individual supervisor fine + imprisonment	\$500,000 + 12 months	OHSA 2026
Fall protection trigger height (Ontario)	3 metres (10 feet)	O. Reg. 213/91

Any cleaning method that places a worker more than 3 metres above the ground triggers mandatory CPO-approved Working at Heights training, fall arrest systems, daily equipment inspections, and on-site rescue plans. Ground-level WFP systems and drone cleaning are the only two methods that bypass this framework entirely by keeping all workers at ground level.

What to verify from any contractor proposing work at height: (1) CPO-approved WAH training certificates for every worker, (2) task-specific certification matching the project classification, and (3) documented daily inspection records retrievable on-site for Ministry of Labour inspectors.

WSIB premium context: Workers' compensation premiums for workers at height are substantially higher than for ground-level operations. This differential is a real cost passed through to the property manager in contractor pricing. The WSIB publishes premium rate tables annually — property managers can reference these to understand the insurance cost component embedded in quotes from different contractors.

12 Environmental Compliance: Three Regulatory Layers

Exterior building cleaning in Ontario operates under three overlapping environmental regulatory frameworks. Most property managers are unaware that non-compliant cleaning operations can create liability for the property owner, not just the contractor.

Layer	Regulation	Key Requirement	Penalty Range
Federal	Fisheries Act, s.36(3)	Prohibits deposit of deleterious substances in fish-bearing water	Min. \$100K to \$1M
Provincial	Ontario EPA / OWRA	Prohibits discharge of contaminants to natural environment	Up to \$6M/day
Municipal (London)	By-law WM-16 & WM-28	Storm sewer chlorine limit: 1.0 mg/L. No dilution defence.	Fines + Federal/ Provincial referral

London's stormwater flows untreated to the Thames River, which is documented fish habitat. Any exterior cleaning operation that allows chemical wash water — particularly sodium hypochlorite (bleach) solutions used in soft washing — to enter a storm drain without containment and neutralization is operating in violation of multiple overlapping regulations. The property where the discharge originated is a party of interest in any enforcement investigation.

What to ask any cleaning contractor: Do you carry containment infrastructure (magnetic storm drain covers, perimeter berms, collection points)? Do you test chlorine residual levels before any discharge? Do you carry insurance endorsements specific to chemical application and environmental liability? If the answer to any of these is no, the operation may be non-compliant — and the resulting liability extends to the property.



13 Decision Framework: Matching Method to Building

The right cleaning method depends on the building, the condition, and the goal — not on which contractor is sitting across from you.

If your building needs...	Primary method	Why
Deep restoration — grinding, recoating, panel replacement	Scaffolding	Only option providing stable multi-trade platform for heavy mechanical work
Tactile inspection — sealant assessment, manual scrubbing	Rope Access	Hands-on contact and feedback that no other method matches
Uniform curtain wall cleaning at height	Swing Stage	Stable multi-worker platform for large, repetitive facades
Rapid repairs on accessible mid-rise sites	Boom Lift	Stability and mobility without multi-week scaffold setup
Routine maintenance cleaning — preventing soiling progression	Drone or WFP	Lowest cost, fastest completion, least disruption, zero fall risk. WFP for under 5 storeys; drone for 4–17 storeys.
Sensitive-occupancy buildings — healthcare, senior living	Drone	Eliminates human presence on the facade entirely
Low-rise maintenance under 5 storeys	WFP / Ground-Level	Simplest logistics, lowest cost, zero regulatory burden
Heavy ground soiling — sidewalks, loading docks	Pressure Wash	High mechanical force effective on concrete and hardscape; unsuitable for facades

The key insight most property managers miss: Most buildings need maintenance far more often than they need restoration. And the buildings that get regular maintenance rarely need restoration at all. Research consistently shows that building owners who neglect regular facade maintenance face repair costs 3–5 times higher than preventive care expenses.

14 A Note on Transparency

This guide was prepared by UPWASH Drone+, a drone-based exterior cleaning company headquartered in London, Ontario. We have a commercial interest in the drone cleaning category. We are transparent about that because we believe it is the only honest way to publish educational content.

What we can verify and what we cannot:

The cost data for scaffolding, rope access, and boom lifts is drawn from published industry sources, Ontario rental market data, municipal fee schedules, and contractor surveys. These methods have decades of market pricing data behind them.

The drone cleaning cost data (\$0.25/sq ft starting point, 30–46% below traditional methods) is based on our own pricing structure and the WSIB premium differential between ground-level and at-height operations. Industrial drone cleaning is a newer category in Canada. The independent cost benchmarking data that exists for traditional methods has not yet fully developed for drone cleaning.

The 80% effectiveness figure cited in Section 7 comes from the Valcourt Group and is their own published assessment, not ours. We cite it because it is the most honest publicly available benchmark for what drone cleaning can and cannot achieve relative to hands-on methods.

If you find any data in this guide that you believe is inaccurate, we welcome the correction. We would rather be corrected than wrong.



Randall Mendez | UPWASH Drone+ | London, Ontario

upwashdrone.com | info@upwashdrone.com

Transport Canada Advanced RPAS Certified | \$5M CGL | WSIB Compliant

We offer complimentary facade assessments for commercial properties in Southern Ontario. If you want an honest evaluation of what your building needs — even if the answer is “not drones” — we are happy to provide one.

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