

Coronavirus and construction sites: Build on or shut down?

BY MATT BAKER



In cities all over the country, construction sites are shutting down due to the COVID-19 crisis, while others are taking steps to limit exposure as work continues. Regardless of the tactic—sustained operations or stoppage—ignoring specific risks can lead to serious cost and project management implications.

For sites that are continuing construction during the pandemic, the contractor should establish several measures to mitigate the spread of the disease. The first step is to limit exposure before anyone even makes it onto the property.

Many sites now require a temperature check of anybody entering the site, as well as when they come and go, including upon return from lunch or break. Other sites are asking workers—either verbally or by signing a form—if they, someone in their household or someone they may have been in contact with is exhibiting symptoms of or is confirmed to have contracted COVID-19.

The most effective weapon against the disease is social distancing, but that can be hard to maintain on an active work site. Some contractors are juggling their teams with shifts so that there are fewer people on site at any one time,

but the project can still move ahead on schedule.

Elsewhere, either out of an abundance of caution or because of a government mandate, work has come to a halt. These work stoppages introduce a host of different issues.

“It’s not as though they can just lock the gate and walk away,” said Julian Anderson, president of Rider Levett Bucknall’s North American region. “They have to make sure that the site is safe.”

That begins with ensuring that temporary utilities are turned off and properly terminated for the duration of the stoppage. The site also needs to be secured to prevent the theft of tools, materials or equipment. This may involve actually removing items to a secure, off-site storage location.

There are a number of considerations to account for when it comes to the biggest pieces of equipment on any site, cranes. Whether or not it is a mobile or a tower crane matters, as it is obviously much easier to move the former than the latter. The expected length of the shutdown is another consideration, as well as whether or not the contractor owns the crane or rented it.

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“I’ve also got to be sure that I can get it back. A lot of cranes on very large site are chosen specifically because of their lift and reach capabilities,” said Anderson. “If I take down a rented crane that was perfect for my project and I want it back a few months later, I may or may not be able to get it. That’s going to factor into the discussions with the building owner.”

Typically, a shutdown is a phased process as some jobs on a site cannot be interrupted halfway through without completion or taking steps to secure the work for an extended stasis. Depending on the size and complexity of a project, as well as the number of subcontractors on site, it could take up to two weeks to fully de-mobilize a site and make it secure for an extended stoppage.

The pandemic won’t last forever, and eventually, workers will be allowed to return. There are some factors to consider, however, before this can happen. In theory, all projects in a particular state or market all shut down at the same time and nothing would have altered the sequence of work being done on those sites. It stands to reason, therefore, that coordinating with subcontractors for specific jobs or acquiring materials won’t be impacted.

However, some projects may shut down much slower than others, and might actually get a few days ahead of where that were going to be. In that scenario, you could see some backlogs as multiple projects are vying for the same subcontractors and/or materials.

According to Anderson, the larger problem that contractors face as we get back to work is just that: getting workers back to the site. Even on projects that are still operational, as much as 10 percent of the workforce is staying away for reasons related to COVID-19—they could have symptoms and are in quarantine, for example, or they might have to stay home to care for children that can’t go to school. That issue doesn’t go away once a stay-at-home order is lifted.

“When work starts back up, I think there will still be leakage problems. The supply of labor won’t go straight back to 100 percent,” Anderson said. “There will be a cranking-up process and any re-mobilization will take several weeks before you get back to any semblance of normality.”

Even if it feels like the COVID-19 pandemic has been going on for a year, we’re still early on in this crisis, so it’s hard to say if there will be long-term impacts on how the trades construct buildings. In the short term, at least, COVID-19 will continue to have repercussions. The disease is not going to just disappear, it will go into the background with periodic flashpoints as we wait for a vaccine.

Until then, people will look askance at every cough and remain skittish about organizing in large groups. But what about two, three, four years from now? “I would hope that the only remaining legacy to come from this is that contractors and owners have good disaster preparedness plans, which they’ve all had to drag out and dust off to cope with this,” Anderson said. ■

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