

## Less traffic on Maine roads gives crews more flexibility for repairs



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Steam rises as Bangor Public Works employees work on patching road potholes in this March 2019 file photo. The vast majority of state road and bridge projects scheduled for work this spring are moving ahead, even though some contractors are temporarily suspending work due to coronavirus concerns, according to a state transportation official.

By [Bill Trotter](#), BDN Staff • April 11, 2020 | [Click here to view online.](#)

ELLSWORTH, Maine — Due to a coronavirus-related drop in the number of cars and trucks on Maine roads, re-paving and bridge rehab crews now have more flexibility with when they can work, according to a state transportation official.

Some projects might benefit from that, Paul Merrill, spokesman for Maine Department of Transportation, said. But others are facing delays because a couple of contractors are suspending work due to coronavirus concerns. Still, most of the state's springtime projects aimed at repaving roads and rehabbing bridges are continuing as planned, he said.

Woolwich-based Reed & Reed Inc., which is contracted on three projects, is on a two-week hiatus beginning Friday, Merrill said. The company posted on its website that it is pausing work "to provide for maximum protection" of its workers during what's projected to be the peak level of infections. All employees will receive full pay and benefits during the shutdown, and no employees will be laid off or furloughed, the company said.

An additional out-of-state contractor also is suspending work, Merrill said, but all other planned road work this spring is advancing.

“Right now, the vast majority of our work is moving ahead as scheduled. We are facing unique challenges and we know there will likely be more down the road,” Merrill said. “The work we do at MaineDOT is essential, and we are fortunate to be able to continue doing this work in the current environment. Safety is always our top priority, and we are in constant communication with the Maine CDC to make sure we are keeping our employees as safe as possible.”



Linda Coan O'Kresik | BDN

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The department's usually heavy workload in the spring of picking bidders for projects has not changed, he said. Over the past month or so, MDOT has received 137 bids for 51 projects that have a total projected construction value of almost \$98 million.

Statewide, there is a drop in traffic of roughly 50 percent, Merrill said, while in the Portland area and at the Piscataqua River Bridge where Interstate 95 crosses the Maine-New Hampshire border, there has been a decrease of more than 60 percent. The reduction in traffic allows more work to be done during the day, when workers might benefit from better visibility but also when traffic volume typically is higher, he said.

“The ability to do work during daytime hours as opposed to overnight certainly makes that work safer,” Merrill said. “In some cases, this flexibility may result in projects being finished faster, but there are too many other variables at play” to say whether specific project timeframes might benefit from more daylight work.

Merrill said road crews are meeting in smaller groups. The department is limiting the number of employees who have contact with each other in MDOT vehicles, either by only allowing one person in a pickup truck, for example, or by spacing them out or erecting barriers in larger vehicles such as vans or buses.

"A lot of the work we do is outside, where it's easier to maintain 6-foot distances than it is in the office," he said, adding that office employees who can work from home are doing so.

There will be lane and ramp closures associated with a repaving project on Route 1 between Brunswick and the Sagadahoc Bridge between Bath and Woolwich, but the contractor will be allowed to work 24 hours a day, six days a week, according to MDOT. There will be single lanes of traffic open in either direction from April 5 through May 22, and ramps at New Meadows Road and Congress Avenue may be closed from 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. from Sunday nights through Friday mornings. Closure notices will be posted 72 hours ahead of time on highway message boards and no two ramps will be closed simultaneously.

"Because of low traffic volume, we expect there will be minimal traffic impacts during this paving work," MDOT officials said in a release. "We will continue to monitor traffic data and may revert to original contract language regarding traffic management if vehicle numbers increase."

Two state bridge rehabilitation road projects in the Bangor area — where Kelley Road crosses I-95 in Orono and the Ohio Street bridge project over the interstate in Bangor — are proceeding as planned, which include periodic lane closures on the interstate highway.



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Merrill said the decision by Reed & Reed to halt construction for two weeks will mostly affect the Maine Avenue Bridge replacement project in Gardiner. Another Reed & Reed project, on Route 302 in Fryeburg, likely will not be affected because the current work there is being done by a subcontractor, Merrill said.

Reed & Reed also is the general contractor on an \$8.2 million project to rehabilitate the Barters Island Bridge in Boothbay, but Merrill said he is unsure how that project might be affected by the company's suspension of work.