

Pandemic crimps Maine's construction industry at start of busy season



Chris Bouchard | Aroostook Republican

In this 2019 file photo, Construction crews with the Maine Department of Transportation work on reconstructing the storm drains on High Street in Caribou as flaggers guide traffic at the roadway's Main Street intersection.

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Maine's construction industry ordinarily would be gearing up for its busy season right now. But the COVID-19 pandemic is forcing new assessments of how to protect the health of workers.

One of the state's largest firms will take at least a two-week hiatus on some major projects.

Jack Reed, of Reed & Reed in Woolwich, which employs more than 250, said he and his crews are rightly concerned about how to continue normal operations and stay 100 percent safe at the same time.

“You know how it is: You get a crew of construction workers together and one guy has a cough, and next thing you know, everybody’s gun-shy. And I don’t blame them,” Reed said. “So it’s really hard.”

Reed & Reed, which has major contracts across Northern New England, plans to shut down operations for at least two weeks. Vermont has already put all its road projects on hold, he notes, while it’s become increasingly difficult to secure protective gear for workers.

“Friday of this week will be our last day of work for at least two weeks. During that time we hope that the crest of new infections of COVID-19 occurs, and as the incidence of infections goes on the downhill side of that slope, that’s when we hope to resume work,” Reed said. “We’ll monitor infections, we’ll monitor the data.”

Reed adds that for at least that two-week period, the company will continue to pay its employees full salary and benefits. And the company’s hiatus means that its work on some big projects will be delayed. Those projects include a wind farm in Aurora, bridges in Gardiner and Boothbay, reconstruction of Route 302 in Fryeburg, and the revamped York toll plaza.

The state Department of Transportation, meanwhile, does plan to move ahead with its other summer construction plans, where possible, says DOT spokesman Paul Merrill.

“Right now the vast majority of the contractors we’re working with are still working right now — as you and I are talking, on Monday, April 6. Things are changing every day but our goal is to keep our people working, keep our people producing and making sure everything is done safely so there’s minimal disruption to the essential work we do around the state,” Merrill said.

Merrill notes that under an executive order Gov. Janet Mills issued last week, DOT construction work is considered “essential,” and so workers on road projects are exempted from her mandatory quarantine for most travelers from out of state, as long as they are not showing any symptoms, haven’t been in direct contact with anyone who’s tested positive or come from a so-called COVID “hot spot.”

It’s an issue that the industry is acutely aware of.

“We’ve had clarification that construction is considered essential, regardless of the type,” Matt Marks, executive director of the Associated General Contractors of Maine, said.

Marks says that fast-moving governmental actions are under constant scrutiny to make sure companies can respond appropriately — particularly when workers may be needed for projects directly related to the pandemic response.

And he says that regardless of whatever the latest government order might be, industry practices have quickly evolved. Worker car-pooling, for instance, is not an optimal travel strategy anymore, and many companies are leasing new vehicles to help prevent potential virus transmission. Some are considering a pull-back such as Reed & Reed is instituting. It will vary from project to project.

“If you have a highway project where you can easily spread out people and equipment, they’re not going to have a lot of interaction during the day with each other,” Marks says. “I can tell you that job site meetings in the morning, for example — people are spread out. They’re no longer huddled around, they’re spread out probably more than six feet. And then they’re not having lunch together. Those are really big things.”

Marks adds, though, that so far it does not look like a major construction industry contraction is under way. But as the Department of Transportation’s Paul Merrill notes, **there is another issue on the horizon** that could affect the sector’s fate: with **traffic on Maine roads down 50 percent or more since February, gas taxes are down as well, and that could put at least a temporary squeeze on the state’s road-building budget.**

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