

At construction sites, work continues under a new normal



Linda Coan O'Kresik | BDN

Construction progress on the Ohio Street bridge in Bangor.

By [Eesha Pendharkar](#), BDN Staff • May 25, 2020 | [Click here to view online.](#)

On Friday morning, as Peter Garrett sat in his truck next to a construction site in the middle of the Maine Turnpike, he noticed that 80 percent of northbound cars had out-of-state plates.

That, to Garrett, was more concerning than returning to his construction site, where he supervises about 50 workers as they replace the existing Maine Turnpike toll plaza in York, just a few miles from the New Hampshire border.

"In York, with the huge amount of out-of-state traffic, the guys would be much more concerned going to the local convenience store or gas station where they're just completely exposed to those with out-of-state license plates than working in our group of Maine construction workers here," he said.

As construction has been deemed an essential business during Maine's coronavirus-related economic shutdown, work has continued more or less

as usual for thousands of workers, but with added safety measures, personal protective equipment and social distancing.



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Construction along Rt.1A in Hampden.

While about one in seven construction workers nationwide have been laid off, Maine has lost construction jobs since February at only about half that rate. Some construction firms are still hiring, but Maine contractors are starting to see the effects of the coronavirus-related economic slowdown.

“We’re on the tail end of it, because our clients and customers are all feeling it right now,” Matt Marks, CEO of Associated General Contractors of Maine, said. “We’re probably going to find out more mid to late summer what those impacts are going to be, but you can see the writing on the wall. Nobody’s going to come out of this without having significant impacts.”

The **Maine Department of Transportation**, which employs contractors for infrastructure improvement work across the state, **estimates that gas tax revenue — which is used to fund road work — will come in at least \$125 million** under budget over the next 18 months. That drop represents about 24 percent of total gas tax revenue the department expected to collect from this April to next September, according to department spokesman Paul Merrill.



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Over the next six months, though, the anticipated losses are much steeper. The department expects to take in about \$74 million less than initially projected — a 40 percent dropoff for that period.

In January, before the pandemic, the department had already planned to complete its two-year construction plan over three years due to an unmet funding need of \$232 million. The coronavirus has made things worse.

"Fewer people driving means fewer people gassing up, and that means far less expected gas tax revenue," Merrill said. "We were already in rough shape, and the hit we're taking because of COVID-19 just further exacerbates an already gargantuan problem."

The department is now hoping the federal government will help fill in the funding gap.

Workers' safety

The more immediate concern for those who oversee and work on construction sites, however, is workers' safety, especially since the first construction site-related outbreak [was reported this week at a site in Augusta](#).

As of Thursday, 26 workers connected to the site, where crews are building a new Maine Veterans' Homes facility, had tested positive for the virus. The workers came from at least four states in addition to Maine, and Maine

Center for Disease Control and Prevention epidemiologists were looking into whether out-of-state workers brought the virus in or whether they contracted the virus while in Maine.



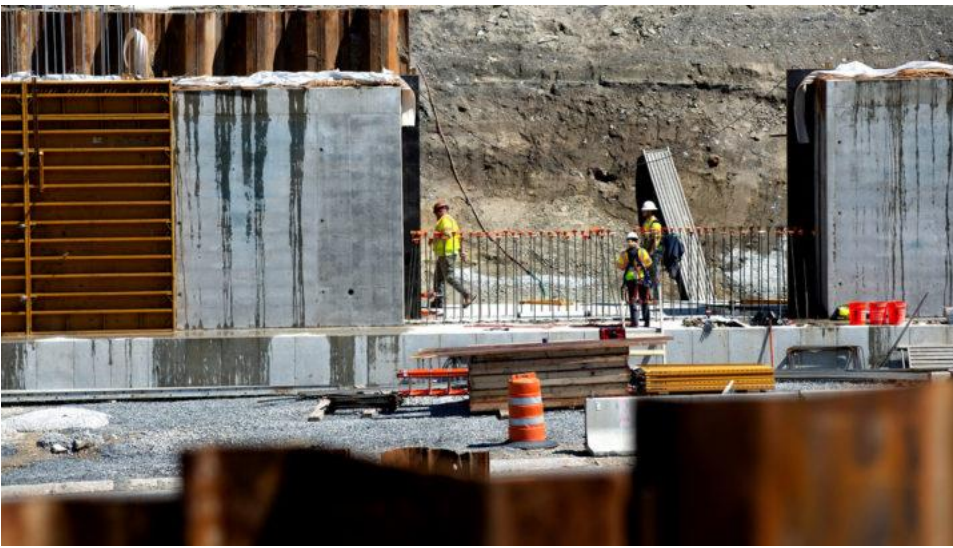
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“There are Maine men and women on the unemployment line who can do these jobs and Maine’s COVID-19 numbers are lower than many other states,” Jason Shedlock, executive director of the [Maine State Building and Construction Trades Council](#), said. “It would stand to reason that perhaps you would look to Maine first for your workforce, rather than bringing in workers from other jurisdictions with a higher infection rate.”

The trades council and AGC Maine are both providing their members with guidelines on safety precautions for work sites, including daily temperature checks, personal protective equipment and social distancing between workers.

“Construction workers sometimes are not used to wearing masks. They’re not used to washing their hands so often,” Shedlock said. “It’s a new normal that folks have to get used to, but it’s something that we’re making sure that our members are aware of. It’s important that we don’t let our guard down when it comes to employee safety. We can’t pretend that this is just going to go away.”



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Some contractors are taking safety measures a step further. Woolwich-based Reed and Reed Inc. shut down operations at all 12 of its project sites in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont from April 10 to April 27. (Vermont didn't allow construction work to resume [until May 11.](#))

"Neither we nor anyone had visibility as to when the peak might occur," chairman and CEO Jack Parker said. "So we just decided that it was a good time to make sure that our employees were safe by sending them home for two weeks. The predictions were that the peak of the curve would have been reached about the time we planned to come back."

Although they were paid during the two-week closure, Reed and Reed employees working on the York toll plaza were happy to be back, according to their supervisor, Garrett.

"I was very curious to see how anxious everybody was going to be after two weeks off," he said. "My crew arrived earlier that first morning than they have all spring. They were really ready to come back to work."

The worst part for crews, he said, will be wearing masks outdoors in the summer heat. He starts every morning doing temperature checks for his team and then the day goes on more or less the same as it did before COVID-19, he said.

"No one even notices it," he said. "It's becoming the norm."

In Summary:

- The Maine Department of Transportation estimates that gas tax revenue will come in [at least \\$125 million](#) under budget over the next 18 months. That drop represents about 24 percent of total gas tax revenue the department expected to collect from this April to next September, according to department spokesman Paul Merrill.
- Over the next six months, though, the anticipated losses are much steeper. The department expects to take in about \$74 million less than initially projected — a 40 percent drop-off for that period.
- In January, before the pandemic, the department had already planned to complete its two-year construction plan over three years due to an unmet funding need of \$232 million. [142 projects were cancelled in January.] The coronavirus has made things worse.
- “Fewer people driving means fewer people gassing up, and that means far less expected gas tax revenue,” Merrill said. “We were already in rough shape, and the hit we’re taking because of COVID-19 just further exacerbates an already gargantuan problem.”