

Op-ed Text:

Yes, Critical Road Work Should Continue During Coronavirus

by David C. Bauer

The COVID-19 outbreak is an unprecedented national challenge that has brought many sectors of America's economy to a grinding, government-mandated halt. Stock markets have fluctuated widely, small businesses are teetering and unemployment claims have soared.

And yet, while most of us stay home, we are still seeing first-hand outside our windows, on television or online, roads being repaved, heavy equipment operating on highways and bridges being repaired.

That's because many of the nation's governors have deemed such public works construction as "essential," which means the transportation construction industry we represent has remained active and working in most states.

While our members recognize the significance of their work to all aspects of the American way of life, the safety and health of our industry workers remain our top priorities. In fact, several features of transportation work allow it to be performed at significantly reduced COVID-19 risk. In the outdoor setting of these projects, social distancing and dispersal of workers are already common, and now mandated.

State departments of transportation and other agencies administering projects are working closely with our industry to implement a full range of safeguards against COVID-19 on the job site. Transportation construction firms are adding these protocols to their existing and extensive project site safety practices.

For example, contractors in Massachusetts must complete a daily 17-point checklist of COVID-19 protection measures for each highway project. Transportation agencies in that state also held full-day "safety stand downs" in which all project participants stopped work and reviewed these requirements in detail. Transportation agencies in Kentucky, Tennessee and elsewhere are increasing the use of electronic documents, eliminating the risks of sharing hard copies.

On the project site, employers are using screening questions before anyone enters, and sick employees are being sent home. As always, workers are fully and properly utilizing Personal Protective Equipment, with excess inventory of N-95 respirators being donated to healthcare facilities in many states. Contractors are regularly directing employees to clean and disinfect tools, supplies and equipment, and practice proper hygiene, including frequent hand washing.

Why is it so important for these infrastructure improvements to move forward?

In 2019, transportation construction generated \$610 billion in economic activity and sustained more than four million U.S. jobs. As a recession looms, continued project activity triggers two-pronged economic benefits. In the short term, it creates and sustains construction and related industry jobs and tax revenue. Longer term, the work builds up capital assets that will enhance economic productivity for many decades by improving supply chain efficiency and providing access to jobs, services, materials and markets.

Furthermore, transportation infrastructure projects require years of planning and environmental reviews by a myriad of state and federal regulators before they reach the construction phase. Recovering from disruptions in the project pipeline can take years, add costs to public owners, and impose hardship on workers.

A number of states are even seizing on the current slowdown in highway traffic to accelerate construction activities. Most notably, Florida just announced plans to complete \$2.1 billion in highway and bridge projects earlier than expected. Similarly, contractors finished repairs to Maryland's Chesapeake Bay Bridge a month earlier than planned. In addition, states like New Jersey are moving some of their night work, which is always more dangerous, to daytime hours.

In difficult times, the U.S. transportation construction industry is uniquely equipped to keep working. In partnership with government agencies across the country, companies in this sector are committed to providing healthy workplaces and continuing to build the projects that will help lead our economic recovery.