The New Normal for Construction in Boston

This is the new normal.

A phrase that will unsurprisingly be uttered ad nauseum in the coming weeks, months and potentially years. With many workplaces shut down across the country, and an increasing amount of work being conducted remotely, most now face the question; what will the world look like when the virus subsides and ‘normal’ is achieved again? This is acutely the case for industries in which work needs to be performed at a particular place rather than over the phone or by video conference call. Construction is conducted on site with hundreds, sometimes thousands of people working at the same time in a finite area. It is no surprise that this would be a cause for alarm and an area that since it has been temporarily halted, has helped mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

Construction is a vital economic engine for large metropolitan areas and small municipalities alike. Building signals a healthy economy and without tradespeople working on infrastructure, hotels, office high-rises, housing, schools, and hospital expansions, the lifeblood of a region can come to a screeching halt and tens if not hundreds of thousands of jobs would be lost. Construction will be a major component of slowly restoring the local and nationwide economy. However, the industry after this crisis will look significantly different than before.

Social distancing is now part of the everyday lexicon of millions of Americans and even more worldwide. Construction however is not an industry of social distancing. Crowded temporary jobsite lifts, small rooms and spaces with multiple tradespeople working in close contact used to be the norm but are now areas of focus. Jobsites also rely on temporary bathroom facilities (Porta-potties) with no running water. These unavoidable facts coupled with tight deadlines which force hundreds if not thousands of tradespeople onto a site at a time to ensure the project is completed on time, can be a recipe for disaster during a pandemic.

It is for all these reasons that Local Union Signatory sub-contractors in unison with the Boston Building Trades Council and General Contractors have partnered to address these concerns. New suggested protocols have emerged from this group so that when construction returns, it will return safely for not only those involved but also their families. Upon returning to work:

* Limits will be placed on how many tradespeople are allowed on a jobsite lift at one time.
* Restrictions will also be placed on the number of people in a room at a certain time so that 6 feet of space can be maintained.
* Staircases will be designated to have one direction of egress.
* Wash stations using temporary plumbing with hot water will be placed on jobsites to help mitigate the spread around bathroom areas.
* Start times for each trade will be staggered i.e. Electricians start at 6:00, Plumbers at 6:30
* In addition to these quick fixes, there will be mandatory health orientations for all those who enter a site as well as daily health screenings to ensure that no one exhibiting symptoms enters the site.
* Catering trucks, long a staple of coffee break and lunch will be required to serve packaged foods and guidelines will be set up regarding the distance between workers in the line.

Safety is certainly not a new frontier for construction, so it is no surprise that leaders on all sides have approached this with great tact and a wealth of experience.

Despite these protocols (And of course their necessity), many questions surrounding the side effects of their implementation remain. If, for instance a certain aspect of a job requires two or more tradespeople to be within 6 feet of each other, will respirators instead of basic N-95 or KN-95 masks be required? If there is a restriction placed on carpooling to a worksite, what will that do to increase the number of cars on the road and the number of already scarce parking spots? These two circumstances, one having to do with health and the other having to do with the more mundane aspects of jobsite routine both signal a seismic shift away from how things were.

The protocols of this “new normal” will in some cases prove to be a hindrance to keeping pace with the schedules set by ownership and will show an increase of overall cost for each job. Daily onboarding and health screening processes will add more time to the start of the day. Less people on jobsite lifts will mean more waiting to get back to the floor where work is being performed. An increase in the need for more PPE now needs to be factored into bids. Slower construction schedules and higher bid prices are also part of this new landscape.

So as in many places of work across the nation and worldwide, the Rubicon has been crossed in construction. The outlines of safety after returning are clear however what is not clear is what implications this will hold for construction in the future. What has rung true for other aspects of daily American life now rings true for construction; uncertainty is the new normal.