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ENR

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Construction and The Pandemic

Construction Responds To Limit Coronavirus Infection Exposure, Manage Work



University of Utah officials in a negative pressure tent outside the university's hospital on March 9 in Salt Lake City. The hospital is taking steps to limit the spread of the coronavirus, including construction of the tents where people can be tested without having to go inside the hospital building.

Photo Credit: Rick Bowmer, AP

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Construction sector firms and industry organizations are responding aggressively to the coronavirus threat as companies scale back in-person interactions and groups create new ways to both learn from and counsel members.

“Gannett Fleming has taken this very seriously before it became an obvious threat and we invested a lot of effort to stay on top of the evolving crisis to keep our employees safe,” Robert Scaer, the company's chairman and CEO told ENR.

Dave Auchter, vice president of Haskell, a Jacksonville, Fla., design, construction and operations, said it has implemented travel restrictions across 21 domestic and five international offices, with approval required at the presidential level.

Construction on a new residence hall at Western Washington University's Bellingham campus has been suspended after a construction worker on site tested positive for COVID-19, the university reported March 13. The university had contracted with Perkins + Will of Seattle and BN Builders of Seattle to design and construct the new building. Two Western workers who were in regular contact with the worker have placed themselves on self-quarantine.

Several U.K. media outlets reported on March 13 that the \$1.3-billion new Google headquarters project in London has been closed for at least two days after a subcontractor with site access tested positive for the virus. About 200 people work at the site, believed to be the first major site in the country affected by coronavirus, reports said.

The situation was confirmed by Australia-based contractor Lendlease, which said in a statement that the affected employee "is in self-isolation ... and, as a precautionary measure, the site has been closed for two days to allow a deep-clean of the facilities.”

Steve McCann, CEO of the publicly-traded firm, warned in a Feb. 20 results call with analysts about possible impacts from the coronavirus and said the firm has issued clients "notice of potential delays," but at the time, said the virus had had no material effect.

As might be predicted, with air travel curbed by U.S. presidential fiat and personal precautions, Delta and United Airlines have announced capacity reductions and plans to cut capital investment by \$2.5 billion and at least \$2 billion, respectively.

Global Precautions

On March 13, Stockholm, Sweden-based Skanska AB had reported one infected employee with others showing symptoms in Norway.

But the company reported no direct impact on projects nor was the disruption of materials or other supplies from China impeding work. "However we are monitoring the situation and planning for different scenarios such as a drop in Chinese production," says a company spokesman.

Skanska banned international travel for its 35,000 employees on March 3 but the 39-day US flight ban for European nationals invoked by President Donald Trump on March 11 has added challenges.

"Our US business constitutes a huge part of our total business. We need to meet, online but also face to face ... This is of course harder these times," says the spokesman..

Since early March, a special coordination team led by the firm's human resources executive vice president has been monitoring impacts of the virus.

While the travel ban has boosted demand for electronic communication, Skanska's IT capacity is coping, says the spokesman, although Swedish staff have been told to go easy on virtual private network (VPN) use, he adds.

A spokesman for London-based design firm Arup Group says "all of our offices worldwide have contingency plans to cope with business disruption and we have been activating those plans as required."

He concedes that "having lots of people working remotely does inevitably put greater stress on our IT systems in terms of bandwidth, but we have added capacity in key strategic areas."

With some of its offices employing more than 1,000 people, "we have been stress-testing our systems to ensure that they can cope with the peak IT demands created by having large numbers of our staff working remotely."

Once the scale of the pandemic became clear, Arup set up a global steering group to coordinate action across the firm.

"The group has been able to translate the experiences of our colleagues in Asia in the early days of the outbreak into practical working knowledge for staff in other countries, which has been invaluable," says the spokesman.

None of Arup's 20 staff in Wuhan, China, where the virus took root, have been affected, he notes. The office was closed, but "we are seeing positive news from Hubei Province and hopefully that signals a return to normal in the not too distant future."

'Uncharted Territory'

The Associated General Contractors will begin holding a weekly webinar, starting March 20, to keep chapters and members informed and allow them to share information and concerns.

Unlike the ConExpo equipment trade show, which ended a day early on March 13, AGC was able to complete meetings and events at its annual conference also on that day and both in Las Vegas.

"We're in uncharted territory here, for AGC and the rest of the industry. Things are happening fast and furious," says spokesman Brian Turmail.

Ed Sullivan, chief economist for the Portland Cement Association, told journalists at ConExpo on March 11 that in the best-case scenario, the coronavirus will mimic influenza's typical six-to-seven-week cycle and begin dissipating by mid-year.

"Six to seven weeks ago, 4,000 new cases were diagnosed a day in China. As of [March 9], it's now 40 a day. This suggests to me that it ... will run its course," he contended.

According to Sullivan, the virus's short-term economic impact can be mitigated if the federal government offers bridge loans to small businesses and paid leave for workers as needed. "Otherwise, there will be a bigger collapse in consumer spending," he said.

Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics, a New York City-based economic research company, forecasts that construction likely will be behind other industries in making any major decisions on layoffs because of the expense of retaining and rehiring, according to a [story](#) in MarketWatch.

Turmail says AGC is doing "a range of things" to help its members, including a web page on its site for virus impact updates.

AGC will begin surveying members on March 16 to gather data about supply chains and emergency or pending regulation on the federal, state and local levels that may impact projects. The association will also focus on jobsite operations and personnel.

AGC has heard only anecdotal reports about supply chain impacts as a result of the virus. "We want to understand and share how federal agencies are responding to the crisis. But we don't know yet what we need to know," he says.

Humphreys & Partners Architects, Dallas, says it will conduct all meetings via the internet for 30 days, limit air travel and encourage work-from-home arrangements. "It is possible that our production levels may decrease if COVID-19 directly impacts any of our locations," said Mark Humphreys, chairman and CEO, in a note to employees. "We are currently evaluating all options to maintain normal levels of productivity, wherever possible,"

Architects May Conference Tabled

In the meantime, several industry sector events have been postponed, including the American Institute of Architects, which [announced on March 13](#) it would not convene its annual conference in Los Angeles on May 14-16 and "is exploring options to reschedule the event."

Alternatives also are being weighed for The American Public Transportation Association legislative conference, originally set in Washington, D.C. March 15-17, while the Business Network for Offshore Wind rescheduled its April 22-23 major networking conference in Providence, R.I. to Aug. 18-21, but will

hold a virtual program on the original dates.

Industry financial and management consultant EFCG will not hold its April 22-24 conference for industry chief financial officers, with "tentative plans" to merge it with its CEO conference on Oct. 7-9 in New York City, the firm says.

ENR's Award of Excellence and Best of the Best Projects events are rescheduled for Aug. 4-5 from their April 2-3 original dates.

Cuomo Calls for Corps Action

In a New York Times opinion [piece](#) March 15, Gov. Andrew Cuomo called upon President Trump to use the Army Corps of Engineers to "leverage its expertise, equipment and people power to retrofit and equip existing facilities — like military bases or college dormitories — to serve as temporary medical centers. Then we can designate existing hospital beds for the acutely ill."

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Aileen Cho, ENR's senior transportation editor, is a native of Los Angeles and recovering New Yorker. She studied English and theater at Occidental College, where a reporter teaching the one existing journalism course encouraged her to apply for the LA Times Minority Editing Training Program. Her journalism training led to her first stories about transportation, working as a cub reporter with the Greenwich Time. Her work has appeared in the Los Angeles Times and New York Times. Many of her experiences with engineers and

contractors have inspired material for her alternative theater productions way, way off Broadway. For ENR, Aileen has traveled the world, clambering over bridges in China, touring an airport in Abu Dhabi and descending into dark subway tunnels in New York City. She is a regular at transportation conferences, where she finds that airport and mass transit engineers really know how to have fun. Aileen is always eager to hop on another flight because there are so many interesting projects and people, and she gets tired of throwing her cats off her computer in her home office in Long Beach, California. She is a very conflicted Mets/Dodgers fan.



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