



PREPARING FOR THE WORST

BY TOM VENETIS

How disaster planning helps contractors prepare for problems and keep building projects on schedule

DISASTERS IMPACTING CONSTRUCTION SITES ARE BY THEIR VERY NATURE UNPREDICTABLE. That does not mean, however, that one cannot be prepared. With the right advance planning, even a complex project can be kept on track when calamity strikes.

Craig Lesurf, vice-president and business group leader with The Walsh Group, says that while disasters are rare, project managers and contractors need to be prepared for every eventuality on every single construction project they work on. Lesurf cites the example of the fires that recently tore through the town of Fort McMurray in Alberta. While forest fires on this scale are rare, clearly they cannot be ruled out.

There are numerous steps that can be taken to make sure project managers and contractors are prepared for such possibilities. The way to do that is to have an emergency action plan in place and to work with everyone on the site so they know how to react when disaster strikes. "It is all about risk management and having a preparedness plan on hand to deal with such risks," Lesurf says. "To put it simply, not having an emergency preparedness plan is a disaster."

COMMON CONCERNS

While every site is unique, and plans should be tailored to each site, there are common issues that every good emergency action plan should anticipate. These are things like water damage due to a ruptured water line, sewer backups, water damage caused by severe weather, fire and smoke damage, structural collapse, and injuries or death of persons on a site.

"Almost every construction site will experience some type of incident," Ram Gilad, general manager with Restoration Aid Inc., explains. "Depending on the size of the project and the duration, multiple incidents during the life of the project can be expected. For example, severe weather events can substantially increase the chances of water damage or sewage backups, and fires due to lighting strikes can be a possibility."

Natural events could include everything from flash floods and hail storms, to heavy snowstorms, tornadoes and high winds and forest fires. In a disturbing trend, there has been a spike in the frequency of unpredictable weather in Southern Ontario, especially in the Greater Toronto Area, wreaking havoc on some construction sites. High winds have taken down scaffolding, damaged crane booms and towers, and blown away unsecured materials and damaged building components.

Sometimes, emergency planning needs to extend beyond the active construction zone. Lesurf gives the example of the Etobicoke General Hospital New Patient Tower Project now underway, a project his firm is involved in. Because the new tower will be connected to the existing medical facility, project managers have to be prepared for a range of possibilities that can impact the construction, and more importantly, patients and staff working in the hospital.

"We had to create (an emergency action plan) to prepare for things like medical emergencies, fires, structural

issues or interruptions of services if power is cut," Lesurf says. "We need to have procedures in place so that such issues can be minimized or prevented, or if something does happen, we need to have procedures in place outlining how to respond."

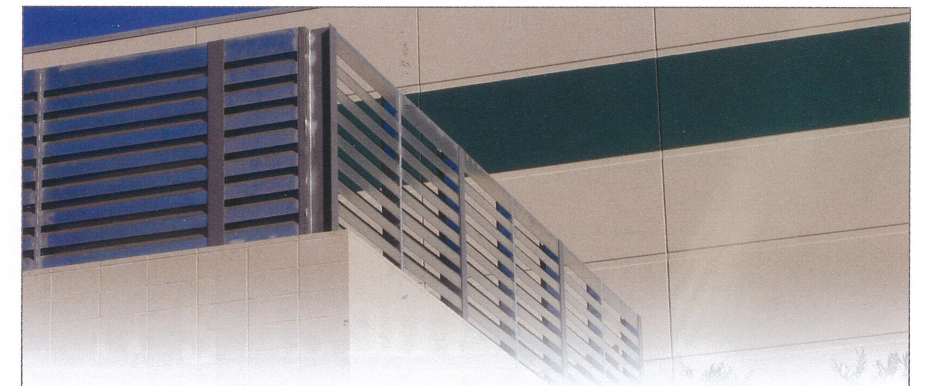
The cost of not being prepared can be expensive. Restoration Aid's Gilad says construction schedules can be severely impacted, and in some cases workers need to be brought back to a site to fix damage or replace destroyed work that was finished earlier. They may need to find and schedule additional trades to make up for the lost time.

Thrown into the mix are additional administrative costs, as well as deciding who will pay for these additional costs. Is it the building's owner or the building owner's insurance company? Is it the construction company's insurance company or the trade and sub-contractors' insurance companies?

"Make no mistake, there will definitely be delays to the construction schedule," note Nick Chin and David Petrozza, both with Solid General Contractors Inc. "The impact will be dependent on the type and severity of the event. The tangible delay will be the time required to remediate and clean up the site to the pre-existing conditions prior to the event. The intangible delay may relate to material losses and re-procurement, equipment repair/replacement, labour dislocation and, most importantly, insurance claim processes. While it is possible to overlap some activities to mitigate time loss, chances are that time will still be lost."

COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

To soften the blow, it is critical that project managers, construction companies and tradespeople come together in advance of the project to establish an emergency action plan,



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DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

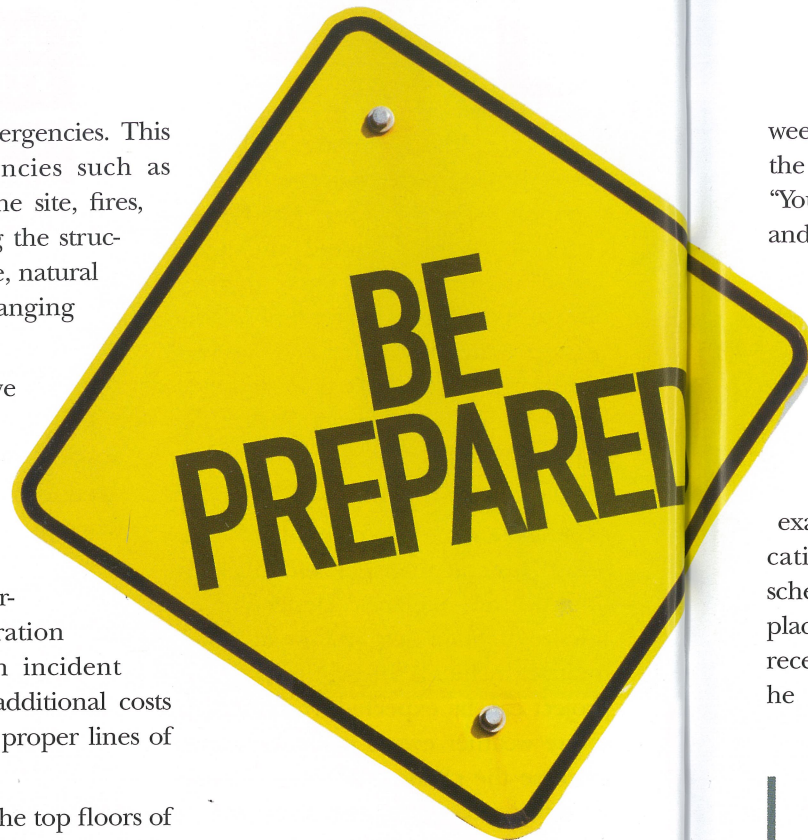
either among themselves or with third-party experts. The plan needs to apply to all construction site personnel, including contractors, suppliers, public agencies, partners, clients and project consultants. It must also clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of key people on the site in case of an emergency or disaster.

Emergency preparedness plans also need to be extensive. Lesurf points to the plan that Walsh Canada has for its team working on the Etobicoke General Hospital project. The plan clearly outlines the responsibilities of the project manager, the superintendent, supervisors and forepersons, workers and all suppliers, client representatives, consultants and visitors. It includes site contact numbers as well as contact information for all emergency response team members, and outlines the actions

to be taken for various emergencies. This includes medical emergencies such as injuries to individuals on the site, fires, spills, emergencies involving the structures, interruption of service, natural events and even threats ranging from violence to terrorism.

Gilad adds that effective plans emphasize clear lines of communications so that everyone knows what they are to do in an emergency, where to go and whom to contact, be it emergency personnel or restoration contractors. He relates an incident on a site that resulted in additional costs simply because of a lack of proper lines of communications.

"A water main on one of the top floors of the building burst and water was running for a few hours due to the fact that the



weekend security guard did not have the right contact information," he says. "You need to educate the security guard and others on the job site as to what an emergency is and the emergency service procedure that's in place. Special consideration needs to be given so that after-hours staff on the site are also aware of the emergency service procedures."

Conversely, Lesurf gives an example showing how clear communication helped one project stay on schedule when a serious incident took place. "The TTC Pioneer Village site received a bomb threat during winter," he explains. "When you get a bomb

"Almost every construction site will experience some type of incident. Depending on the size... multiple incidents during the life of the project can be expected"

Ram Gilad, Restoration Aid Inc.

threat, you cannot stay on the site. Because we had a clear procedure of what to do, proper evacuation routes and protocols that made sure everyone knew where they had to go when such an incident happens, we were able to get everyone out quickly and safely. We even knew who we had to contact to make sure that busses were there to receive everyone so they had a warm place to stay and remain safe."

Once the site was secured and local authorities confirmed that it was safe to return, Walsh Canada got its team back

to work the same day. "If we did not have a plan in place, lines of communication and procedures of what to do and where to go, and whom to contact to get those busses out there, we would have lost a day's worth of work," notes Lesurf. "Instead of losing a day, we only lost a couple of hours."

Advance planning and the foresight to prepare for all eventualities

DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

– even something as rare as a bomb threat – ensured the building project returned to schedule in as short a time possible, saving the company a substantial amount of money.

It is this type of advance planning that all building contractors need to incorporate in their construction projects – no matter how small the risk of possible disaster. **LD**

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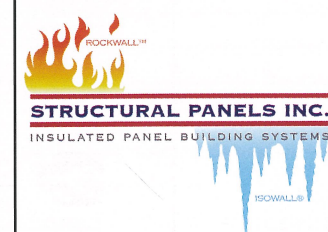
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