

TAUNTON DAILY GAZETTE

Construction pros benefiting from mild winter

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By

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Thursday's nor'easter notwithstanding, conditions this winter have been welcome news for the construction industry in Massachusetts.

"The consensus is, from a construction standpoint, it's been a good winter," said Greg Beeman, president and CEO of the Massachusetts chapter of the national trade group Associated Builders and Contractors Inc. "Anything that affects schedule affects cost."

When winters are mild, construction crews can generally get more work done on building projects.

"This winter, it hasn't been long, sustained cold spells, which has increased productivity and reduced costs," said Angus Leary president and general manager of Suffolk Construction's northeast division.

But when there are cold temperatures and heavy snowfall, workers face a host of challenges. Clearing snow from worksites puts a huge dent in productivity, and frozen earth means specialized equipment is sometimes needed to dig below the

frostline. Wet, heavy snow can threaten to collapse roofs, further limiting the work construction crews can do.

When temperatures are cold, contractors often need to rent heating equipment, incurring an additional cost. If the temperature is below 20 degrees for a sustained stretch, it often becomes too challenging to heat a worksite, said Ben Goldfarb, vice president of Needham-based Nauset Construction and board chairman at the Massachusetts Building Congress, a statewide construction industry organization.

"It definitely has a significant impact in terms of worker efficiency," Goldfarb said. "The warmer temperatures especially, and with less snowfall, that makes things easier. I think everyone is realizing a monetary savings on their budget and schedule efficiency."

Nauset Construction, which has approximately 10 projects going at any specific time, did an internal analysis two years ago to attempt to measure the impact of winter weather on the bottom line. They found each major snowstorm cost the company about \$40,000, Goldfarb said.

Leary described another cost construction companies incur during prolonged cold snaps.

"If we have a really long string of really cold days, if we're doing foundations and pouring concrete, we have to put additives in the concrete and heat the concrete," he said.

If winter conditions continue to be on the mild side, there will almost certainly be a positive impact on the budgets and schedules of a majority of ongoing projects. At this stage, Beeman explained, it's difficult to quantify exactly what the impact will be.

"One contractor told me that in the really bad winter two years ago, they had a string of about six Mondays over the peak of winter where they lost all construction work," Beeman recalled. "They had to do snow removal on the site. They went from a five-day week to a four-day week six different weeks. They've had none of that this winter."

Indeed, conditions are considerably milder this winter. Boston just experienced its 11th warmest January on record, 6.1 degrees above the historic average, said Bill Simpson, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Taunton. Through the first week of February, the temperature was 4.1 degrees warmer than the average for the month.

Those warmer conditions mean contractors have incurred fewer costs for renting and fueling heating equipment. It's also meant that the ground has been soft enough for crews to perform certain types of work

"One contractor told me he was able to get some foundation work in that in the winter is often questionable or not doable," Beeman said.

At a Feb. 7 board meeting, many Associated Builders and Contractors Inc. members were happy with the winter thus far, but some remained guarded with their optimism, Beeman recalled..

"One said he's really happy right now, but he's not comfortable to say we're going to end the winter with everything A-OK or on or ahead of schedule," Beeman said. "It would be unusual to get through the winter being the way it's been. If you're in Massachusetts or New England, you have to be resilient and you have to plan for winter conditions."