



# Moving Projects Forward in Times of Uncertainty

by Joshua L. Porter, PE

**I**n March 2009, the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) released the “2009 Report Card for America’s Infrastructure.” The report graded the nation with a “D” and estimated that \$2.2 trillion would need to be invested over the next five years to return our nation’s infrastructure to an acceptable working condition. Florida fared no better than the rest of the nation with 18 percent of Florida’s bridges being structurally deficient or functionally obsolete, 72 high-hazard dams whose failure could cause loss of life and significant property damage, and nearly half of all of our major urban highways being congested.

The nation has been a poor steward of its infrastructure. Projects have been underfunded or postponed, and our roads and bridges have been falling apart. Many cities and states are reactionary at best, addressing critical projects only after they have become a risk to the public.

I was walking with my two year old son the other day, and as we walked down the road, he pointed down and asked, "What's that?" We stopped and I looked down at one of the hundreds of cracks in my road and I replied, "It's a crack." My son looked up at me and said, "It's broken daddy." That got me thinking about the ASCE Report Card and what kind of stewards we have been of the things we have made and purchased. A two year old could determine that the road is broken, yet my county hasn't had an asphalt company in my neighborhood in almost two decades. As we rounded the corner and approached our house, I

looked around and thought about what I needed to do in order to maintain my own home and property... for the first time in years.

### Florida Condominium Buildings

There is a limited amount of time you can put off maintenance and repairs, especially those pertaining to your home. We take our automobiles in regularly for oil changes and tune-ups. It seems preposterous to wait until the oil becomes so bad that the engine fails and we have it repaired. Yet that is often what we do every year with our homes. ASCE didn't grade the state of homes and residential buildings such as condominium buildings, but I have a nagging feeling we wouldn't score much better. While many associations take exceptionally good care of their buildings, there are many more that put off repairing or restoring their building until it becomes dangerous, and even then, only do the very minimal amount necessary.

In this economic recession, associations are apprehensive to spend money on restoration projects and, in some cases, believe they cannot afford them. Putting off maintenance and repairs is called deferred maintenance or replacement. We give it a clever name and pat ourselves on the back for the justification of putting off an expensive project and avoiding assessments for another year. But the ugly truth is that the longer you wait, the more it will likely cost. This isn't a linear value either. Concrete and steel damage occurs exponentially. It may have taken your building twenty years to generate \$300,000 worth of repairs, but it will take only three more years to make it a \$1 million project.

Fortunately, there are several ways to reduce costs and mitigate the impact a project may have on the association without compromising the integrity of the work. As much as I would like to say these ideas have come from the consulting industry, I cannot. The fact of the matter is that savvy board members have refused to accept "business as usual" and have requested that professionals and contractors go back to the drawing board and rethink their projects. The result is that projects are moving forward, associations are meeting their fiduciary responsibilities, and the industry as a whole is smarter for it.



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### Phased Construction

Many associations, especially ones with waterfront buildings, can often schedule portions of the building to be repaired immediately while scheduling the remainder for the following year. This ensures the most serious repairs are made in a responsible and timely manner while spreading out the costs over a two year period instead of funding it all up front. This often results, however, in overall higher project costs due to the need to have separate permits and two mobilization phases.

We have been observing more and more though that contractors are reducing or altogether eliminating double mobilization costs depending on how the phasing of the work is structured and how the project is bid. In many cases, the initial cost of restoration can be significantly reduced. Phased construction is not a new concept in the construction industry, but it has definitely become more applicable in this economic climate.

### Avoid Unproven Technologies

Recently, especially during the recent economic boom, some contractors and professionals were promoting new technologies to associations. These technologies came with the hope that restoration projects would be further apart and some of these technologies promised no more restoration projects ever. However, these technologies typically add 10 percent to 25 percent to the total project cost and most of them have not been in service long enough to be considered a proven solution. At a recent trade show I attended, a product representative for one such technology admitted that their oldest

project was completed just fourteen years ago. In terms of concrete repair and restoration, that is not a significant amount of time.


Standard restoration work conducted to current, best-industry practices can be expected to last longer than restoration work conducted in the past as a result of basic improvements in materials and methods. Our understanding of what causes buildings to age and how to prevent it increases substantially with each passing year.

### Don't Procrastinate

The number one way to keep costs low is to be aggressive. The average association waits until the cracks on their building are significantly large or concrete is falling off. Most proactive associations consult with an

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engineering firm to assess their building at the first signs of cracks or spalling, and the associations saving the most money consult with professionals to have their buildings inspected before each painting project. This often results in problems being identified and corrected during the painting of the building. The costs of painting projects will go up a small amount, but this process could potentially negate the need for ever having a major restoration project and the high costs associated with it.

Another important reason for not procrastinating is to reduce liability and exposure to injury claims resulting from falling concrete, failed handrails, and cracked slabs for example. Associations have a fiduciary responsibility to maintain the building and surrounding property in order to protect their residents and visitors. A well-maintained structure in good condition will not pose a threat to the community.

### **Necessity Breeds Innovation**

Just like our nation's bridges, roads, dams, and other infrastructure, our homes and buildings age and break down over time. Routinely restoring buildings and structures is not a new concept. The Roman Coliseum was repaired and rebuilt more times than historians can accurately determine. Several projects, especially those conducted in trying times, involved new and improved materials and new engineering principles which advanced the practice overall.

This tough economic period is no different. The concrete falling off your building does not know or care about world markets, unemployment rates, or bank-owned units. Try as you may to put off major projects, but the problems will only get worse and the costs increase daily. Fortunately, it isn't all doom and gloom. Professional consultants and contractors know how hard it is right now to meet these demands and protect your investments and can offer cost-effective options for you to meet your obligations. This is not a time to bury our heads in the sand but a time to get active in the maintenance of our structures.

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