March 23, 2020

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Governor of Florida
Plaza Level 05, The Capitol
400 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0001

Dear Governor DeSantis:

On behalf of the Gulf Coast Builders Exchange, we write to urge you to consider policy proposals to support the commercial contracting sector of the economy during the COVID-19 pandemic. GCBX’s members stand with you during these uncertain times and look to your leadership to help steer the community through uncharted waters. To help stabilize the construction industry in the near term, we ask you to designate commercial construction as an “Essential Infrastructure Business” in Florida.

The Gulf Coast Builders Exchange (GCBX) was established in 1952 and is a not-for-profit corporation operating as a trade organization under the guidance of a volunteer board of directors as representatives of the industry. The not-for-profit organization represents a broad cross section of the building industry, including contractors, subcontractors, suppliers and others from affiliated industries. The GCBX membership is comprised of over 400 companies in Manatee, Sarasota and Charlotte counties. It includes some of the most respected contractors, subcontractors, suppliers, service providers and businesses in construction-affiliated industries.

We encourage you to consider four main factors:
• Recognize that construction is essential and should be allowed to continue under a remain in place order;
• Government functions related to the building and development process, such as inspections, permitting and plan review services can be modified to protect the public health, but fundamentally should continue and serve the construction industry (E.g., Allow qualified private third-party inspections in case of government shutdown);
• Suppliers necessary to serve the construction, repair and maintenance should be allowed to operate; and
• Those working in building trades must be allowed to continue to maintain the essential operation of operating businesses.

Our industry continues to adhere to public health guidelines set forth by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

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According to OSHA, “Lower exposure risk (caution) jobs are those that do not require contact with people known to be, or suspected of being, infected with SARS-CoV-2 nor frequent close contact with (i.e., within 6 feet of) the general public. Workers in this category have minimal occupational contact with the public and other coworkers.” Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19, p.20.

A large majority, if not all land development and commercial construction job tasks fall within OSHA’s Lower Exposure Risk jobs. Obviously, working on new commercial construction sites occurs primarily outdoors and does not involve going onto a location occupied by residents or a public location, and there is minimal (if any) physical or transactional contact with customers compared to other customer/client relationships. We understand any construction projects at nursing homes are not low risk and have already ceased.

Commercial Contracting is highly regulated and therefore cannot occur without support from the locality where it occurs. Builders require governmental approvals and permits to begin a project and they are needed through project completion. Therefore, governmental inspections occur along the entire process from the land development to final certificate of occupancy.

As part of the Essential Infrastructure, commercial construction requires that government building and zoning departments continue to operate. Furthermore, for the safety and wellbeing of current and future occupants, governments must allow inspections to occur in a timely manner.

The inspection process may benefit from modifications. For example, if possible, inspectors may work “off hours” to minimize any contact with the construction team. Or they can make other arrangements with the owner or general contractor to safeguard their health by ensuring nobody will be on site during an inspection. Furthermore, certain localities use third-party engineers to sign off on inspections. It may be necessary for commercial contractors to request this option if local governments are closing their building department during the pandemic. Construction is currently one of Florida’s major economic staples. Keeping the men and women of the industry building must be a priority. If construction is disrupted, it creates a domino effect leading to dire negative economic repercussions for an already-burdened economy.

Along with our brethren at the Florida Home Builders Association (FHBA), we request that you consider construction an essential service, so that individuals may continue to perform work necessary to the operations and maintenance of “Essential Infrastructure.” We appreciate your leadership and the work of your staff and those who are spending every waking hour keeping us safe.

Sincerely,

Mary Dougherty, GCBX Executive Director