

Planning Your Construction Project in the Mountains: A Window of Opportunity

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Nowadays, it seems as if every new construction project is “fast-track.” With materials costs rising and construction windows tighter, a project schedule is of utmost importance. No where is this more true than in the mountains.

The construction season in the mountains can vary depending on where a project is located. But, whether you are in Summit County or Avon, winter mountain weather is sure to impact your project. In my experience, the construction season in mountain towns tends to run, on average, from April 15 to October 15. Of course, this depends on elevation, sun exposure and general weather patterns year to year.

Too often the shorter construction season isn't properly accounted for during the project planning phase. It is many times an afterthought, and isn't fully considered until the general contractor has been selected. But, at this point it can be too late. With the ground frozen several months a year, your construction team needs to take advantage of the cooperating weather as much as possible. At the very least, your construction team needs to have the foundations in by November. If not, you will be faced with frozen ground, snow removal, and the extra costs and lost productivity of working in the winter or delaying construction until spring and losing valuable time in the schedule.

How to Plan for the Conditions?

When embarking on a project, owners are often motivated to push through the project planning process as fast as possible. The thought is that days “wasted” upfront equal lost money. But oversights and poor planning can cost an owner in the end. The first thing that an owner needs to do when planning a mountain project is to identify important milestones in the construction process, such as breaking ground.

This means that ideally the owner wants their construction team on site and ready to work when the frost breaks in mid-April. Design scheduling with proper reviews and having the general contractor on board early in the process is critical.

Keeping an April or May start in mind, the planning process ideally would follow this timeline:

- ✓ 1 year (public projects) to 2 years (private projects) before breaking ground – *troubleshooting land, permitting, financing, and other issues by owner*
- ✓ 10 to 12 months before breaking ground – *architect selection and design of facility*
- ✓ 6 to 8 months before breaking ground – *general contractor selection*
- ✓ 3 to 4 months before breaking ground – *general contractor solicits bid packages*
- ✓ April or May – *break ground*

By planning with this schedule owners can ensure that they will take advantage of the most construction-friendly days as possible. Also, since winter is a slow period for many subcontractors, the bid packages that contractors send them in January and February will receive greater attention.

Conclusion

Design schedule, construction schedule and costs are key components of a project. Taking the time to properly plan around the winter construction season can help owners control these components. Trying to work outside in the mountain winters leads to additional costs from lost productivity, ground thawing, snow removal and increased lodging for your team because housing rates escalate during ski season. Having the foresight to properly plan a project so that it does not get off to a late start will pay dividends in the end.

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