

# ROAD CONSTRUCTION SURVIVAL GUIDE

Helping your business prosper before, during, and after road construction



GREATER MADISON  
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

LEADERSHIP AT WORK




SMALL BUSINESS  
ADVISORY COUNCIL

to the GMCC and the Mayor of Madison



*This document is available due to a generous contribution from  
Supreme Structures, Incorporated.*





Dear Madison area business owner:

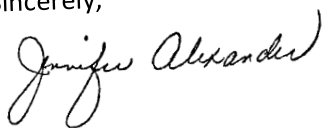
Road construction can present challenges for businesses, but with the right information, proper coordination, and strategic planning, your business can not only endure the process, but also prosper during it.

In 2008, the Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce Small Business Advisory Council (SBAC) – a group of small business owners that advises the GMCC Board and Mayor of Madison on small business issues – set out to examine the construction process in the City of Madison and research strategies and best practices other businesses have used during road projects. The culmination of their work led to creation of this business survival guide, which offers information on construction, available city resources and strategies to consider for your business.

This project was truly a collaborative effort led by the SBAC, with support from GMCC and city staff. We'd also like to thank Supreme Structures, Incorporated, whose generous contribution made this publication possible.

We hope this guide will help you and your employees prepare for any future disruptions caused by road construction. If you have any additional questions, please don't hesitate to contact city or GMCC staff. We want to help your business throughout the process. Road construction can be challenging at times, but the end result can be very rewarding for your business.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Alexander  
President, GMCC



David Cieslewicz  
Mayor, City of Madison



# TAKE ACTION TO PROTECT YOUR BUSINESS

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Attention Madison area small business owners—if your business is located in a road construction project area, your business will likely be financially impacted. According to a recent survey by the Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce Small Business Advisory Council (SBAC), an advisory group to the chamber and Madison Mayor, 68% of the business respondents indicated that their revenues declined during a road construction project. Equally alarming was that 54% of the same respondents indicated their business did not return to prior levels after completion of construction, and for some continued to decrease.

To help small businesses survive road construction, the SBAC created this survival guide containing appropriate municipal and business contacts and tips for surviving the construction process.

## *In this guide you'll find:*

- The best time to get involved in a project—early!—and have your voice heard.
- Early business planning strategies to ready your company for the road construction project ahead.
  - Everything from inventory to customer and employee communication

- What to expect once construction begins
  - How to retain your customer base during difficult times
- Survival tips for making it through the construction project
  - Communication, staying on message, staying positive and using creative promotion and business strategies
- Post-construction ideas to get your business back on track
- Additional business resources



While road construction can be hard on small businesses, the maintenance and repairs can be good for your company in the end. One Madison business owner who went through two years of road construction said, “Although it was a painful process, the end product was worth it. The project enhanced the traffic flow to my business and my guests are more likely to frequent my business because of this.”

With this positive outcome in mind, be prepared ahead of time. Plan carefully so that once the project is completed, your business can continue to thrive.

## GET INVOLVED EARLY

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The City of Madison typically includes road construction projects within its Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP) several years in advance of when construction is to occur. Information about upcoming projects can also be found on the City’s Public Works website [www.cityofmadison.com/business/pw](http://www.cityofmadison.com/business/pw).

As early as a year in advance of the start of construction, the City will start the process of reaching out to businesses within the impacted corridor. This will likely include mailings to business owners inviting them to planning meeting(s) for the project. Your concerns, questions, and suggestions are very important at this early stage in the planning process as the City still has the greatest flexibility to incorporate changes into the project at this time. Please watch for mailings and attend these meetings to learn more about the project and to provide any input that you may have.

Every November, the City adopts a Capital Budget, which includes the final list of road construction projects for the following year. At this time, the City will begin preparing bid documents for the projects.

For most projects, the City will release bids and hire a contractor during the spring prior to the start of the summer construction season. Once a contractor is hired to complete the work, the City will host another round of pre-construction meetings with the contractor and business owners. The goal of these meetings will not be to gather input, but rather to ensure everyone is aware of the upcoming construction schedule and pertinent construction contacts.

Disruption from construction can be mitigated if there is proper coordination between business owners, city officials, contractors and businesses. Remember, the earlier your

concerns are voiced, the better prepared the project team will be to respond to them.

To this end, it is in your best interest as a business owner to keep abreast of current and upcoming construction projects. Communicate with your alder, read the city's website for updates, join local business organizations and attend as many meetings as you can.

*Business owners can contribute ideas and make concerns known by:*

- Attending public hearings and meetings
- Filling out comment forms
- Calling or writing to the team in charge of the project. This can usually be determined on the city's website, or by calling the city's Engineering Department at 266-4751.
- Securing individual meetings with the project's engineers

## BUSINESS PLANNING: WHAT YOU CAN DO BEFORE CONSTRUCTION BEGINS

As a business owner, you are always planning and improving on your business model. When you're informed ahead of time, road construction is something you can prepare for. Here are some suggestions from business owners who've been through the construction process already.

- **Keep your staff lean.** It's an unfortunate reality, but if you expect a significant decrease in customers once construction begins, you may need to consider keeping a lean staff. If someone quits in the spring, you may decide to keep the position vacant if there is a construction project coming up that summer. Other options might include job sharing or reducing hours.
  - Some downtown business owners shared that when they became aware of an upcoming construction project, they would leave positions vacant when there was a natural attrition of employees, rather than rehiring.
- **Reduce inventory.** When possible, reducing inventory can be a useful strategy to respond to slower periods due to construction.
- **Secure a line of credit,** while times are good. It's important to get a line of credit during a good time when sales are up. That way you'll have it when and if there's an emergency.
- **Gather customer contact information.** Les Barnett, a small business consultant from Bates Technical College in Tacoma, Washington, advises that you work on gathering customers' contact information before construction begins so you can keep them apprised of road conditions, best routes and promotional specials during the construction period. You might consider sending weekly e-mails to customers with the idea that if



you keep them informed and in the loop, they won't be as likely to change their buying habits during construction.

- **Inform customers months in advance.** Keeping your customers informed gives them the ability to maneuver construction and access your business. Examples can include putting up signs or passing out copies of alternative routes to the business before the project.
- **Work with your employees to develop a game plan.** Talk to your employees about the process and strategies to stay prosperous during construction. Discuss marketing efforts and allow employees to share any concerns they may have. Your employees will appreciate the opportunity, and the dialogue may produce new ideas that will benefit your business.

# WHAT TO **EXPECT** ONCE CONSTRUCTION BEGINS AND HOW TO MITIGATE PROBLEMS

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Dust and noise are both inevitable during a construction project and not areas where you will have a great deal of control. Traffic delays and blocked access routes are also difficulties that may arise during construction. Here are some ideas to deal with these issues.

- **Allocate more time or money to cleaning.** While there's little you can do to reduce the dust and noise of a construction site, you can focus on keeping your own business as dust-free as possible. If you only clean your windows once a week right now, you might consider increasing that during the construction period. You may also decide to allocate more time or money for general cleaning and upkeep, in order to keep construction dust to a minimum.
- **Create a friendly rapport with construction workers.** While the on-site construction workers aren't the appropriate people to contact about concerns, it can only improve the situation if you create a friendly rapport with them. You might supply complimentary ice water to crews in the summer.
  - This said, it is important to emphasize that construction workers are following instructions from their supervisors, and **communicating concerns to supervisors and project leaders is the best way to get results.** To this end, know who those supervisors are and **keep their contact information close** at hand.
- **Make sure signage is clear.** Traffic delays will also be inevitable during a construction project, but signage can help a great deal. **See what sort of signs are going up to direct traffic and make sure they make sense for your customers.** Construction crews aren't aware of your needs and often it's just a matter of asking.
  - The issuance of temporary signage is the responsibility of the City project manager who will be different for each project. There are three types of temporary business signs that can be installed to assist customers: driveway signs, alternate business access signs and directional signs.

*“Communicating concerns to supervisors and project leaders is the best way to get results.”*

- **Driveway Signs** help to tell motorists where to turn since construction can make it difficult for motorists to find the driveway. The business provides and installs this sign.
- **Alternate Business Access Signs** are installed by the contractor and businesses may attach their sign below the Alternate Business Sign. These signs state “Alternate Business Access” and have an arrow on them. They are placed in advance of intersections to inform motorists where to turn. The business provides the sign and the sign is installed by the project's contractor below the sign with the words “Alternate Business Access” on it.
  - **Directional Signs** are used where the Alternate Business Sign is not an available option. They are used to direct the motorist using a side street toward your business. The business provides and installs these signs.
- If you wish to place any of the above temporary signs—highly recommended to provide easier access for your customers during construction—you must fill out a permit for a temporary sign. The application form is available through the road construction project website, found at: <http://www.cityofmadison.com/transportation/roadworks>. No fee is charged for the temporary signs but it is important that you obtain the permit prior to ordering the signs.
- **Consider using a back entrance for better customer access. Access to your business is often a problem during a construction project.** Make sure there are signs directing your customers to the right entrance, and if you have a back door, consider using it. A True Value hardware store that suffered through a long construction project in Lansing, Michigan, credits its survival to having a back entrance to their store. And the business owners made sure to advertise this rear entrance and parking in every radio spot and newspaper ad the company purchased.

## TIPS FOR SURVIVAL ONCE CONSTRUCTION BEGINS

- **Communication** will be critical during the entire construction project. As a business owner, you must communicate with the construction project managers, your employees, other businesses and, most importantly, your customers.



*Make sure signs put up by construction crews make sense for your business. If they don't, contact the project supervisor.*

1. **Keep project manager's contact information close at hand.**
  2. **Provide directions and access information for your employees.** Don't let them make the area more congested. Depending on the number of people you employ, you might consider offering a carpool from an agreed upon location. During the Todd Drive construction, Jim Garner, CEO of Sergenian's, organized a shuttle to pick up employees each morning from a lot further away from his business, helping to decrease congestion near his store.
  3. **Join local business organizations or consider forming one.** Strength is found in numbers. Make sure to communicate with other local leaders so you can band together and make concerns heard.
  4. **Provide signs to guide customers to your business.** Once again, go out and make sure signs put up by construction crews make sense for your business. If they don't, contact the project supervisor.
- **Deliver products to your customers.** To reach customers unable or unwilling to navigate the construction area, Susan Bulgrin, owner of two Culver's restaurants, initiated a catering business. She brought Culver's to her customers and she credits this as one method that helped her business endure construction.
  - **Keep on Message.** Consider keeping a script next to your phone, so that you and your employees have quick and easy directions to provide to customers. Make sure all your employees know what to say and how to say it.
  - **Stay informed!** Attend all public meetings relating to the construction project. Be sure to open all city correspondences.
  - **Extend business hours.** Consider being open later in the evening after construction crews are finished for the

day. Be flexible to accommodate customer demands and other perceived needs.

- **Make the construction work for you.** If you were considering a remodel for your business, why not do it during the construction period. Use this slower period to get things done that you haven't had time to address.

- **Creative Promotions.** Businesses have come up with lots of creative ways to make the construction period fun for customers.

1. One State Street business used to have a construction worker sit outside of their shop during the lunch break and talk to kids and families about the ongoing project. The trucks were a big draw for kids.

2. In Lansing, Michigan, local store owners established their own version of "Where's Waldo," inviting customers to search store windows each week for a hidden character. People then submitted the location into an orange barrel and these names were used for a drawing every week.

3. A fabric store in Lansing had employees take pictures in front of the large, orange construction barrels holding swaths of the store's fabric. Postcards were then sent to customers saying "We at the Fabric Gallery know that a fabriholic won't let a little road construction stand in the way." This store also set up an 800 number customers could call to get construction updates and directions to the store.

4. Some Madison businesses have used prize drawings to attract customers. Do something above and beyond what you would usually do in your business to attract customers.

- **Consider pooling advertising resources with other businesses** in the construction zone to let the public know you are still open for business.

- **Be positive.** Encourage and generate a positive, healthy environment to support your staff and ensure retention of valued employees.

## YOU MADE IT! POST-CONSTRUCTION—NOW WHAT?

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Once construction is over, it's time to focus on recapturing market share and winning back customers. **Consider promotion and advertising** to let customers know the roadways are free. Promote the new image and convenience of the completed roadway.

**Celebrate the project's completion.** Take advantage of your Chamber membership by holding a ribbon cutting

ceremony and invite the news media to the ceremony. Or consider pooling resources with local businesses for a grand celebration and/or shared advertisement.

Finally, support other businesses that undergo a similar process. Give them your patronage and provide helpful feedback based on your experiences.

## ADDITIONAL BUSINESS RESOURCES

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For additional help, you might consider seeking free guidance from local business organizations such as:

### **Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce (GMCC)**

615 East Washington Avenue  
P.O. Box 71  
Madison, WI 53701-0071  
(608) 256-8348  
FAX: (608) 256-0333  
info@greatermadisonchamber.com  
www.greatermadisonchamber.com

### **University of Wisconsin-Madison Small Business Development Center**

Small Business Answer Line  
Monday–Friday: 8:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m.  
(608) 263-7680  
Or e-mail your question to:  
<http://www.wisconsinsbdc.net/busanswer/>

### **WWBIC, Wisconsin Women's Business Initiative Corporation**

2300 S. Park Street  
Madison, WI 53713  
(608) 257-5450  
<http://www.wwbic.com>

### **SCORE, The Service Corps of Retired Executives**

Monday–Friday: 9:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m.  
(608) 441-2820  
<http://scoremadison145.org>

### **Acknowledgements:**

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*The Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce Small Business Advisory Council is an advisory committee to the leadership of the Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce and the Mayor of the City of Madison. The council serves as a credible voice for the needs and concerns of small businesses throughout the greater Madison area.*



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