

CIVIL UNREST AND THE 2020 ELECTION SEASON

An extraordinary year holds the unfortunate potential to become even more challenging as a string of competing crises in the United States threatens to coalesce around the 2020 election. Political instability—intensified by the convergence of an economic recession, social turmoil, and the historic COVID-19 pandemic—has led to predictions of sustained civil unrest and possible violence. While the commercial real estate sector is accustomed to preparing for a variety of emergencies, the current landscape calls for heightened vigilance and preparations to minimize potential disruptions and protect the safety of individuals and properties.

BACKGROUND

Property professionals have been dealing with an onslaught of challenges: the COVID-19 pandemic produced an overwhelming public health emergency that continues to dramatically affect the work environment; the national economy—spurred by the pandemic—plunged into recession, with devastating ramifications for employment and occupancy rates; and the country’s long-standing struggle with issues of racial injustice erupted into a massive social and protest movement.

Tensions are high and the country has been experiencing widespread protests and civil unrest, including the increasing occurrence of face-offs between demonstrators and counterdemonstrators. The social justice movement aligned with Black Lives Matter—sparked by the death of George Floyd and similar incidents—may represent the largest protest movement in the country’s history. Thousands of demonstrations have taken place across the country; on June 6 alone, it is estimated that half a million individuals took part in protests, with many cities experiencing crowds in the tens of thousands. Concurrently, there have also been more than 1,000 pandemic-related demonstrations that have sometimes included confrontations between groups for and against lockdown restrictions.

Into this perfect storm arrives the 2020 presidential election. Not only is the campaign hotly-contested, but the outcome could remain unclear and disputed for weeks or even months. An increase in absentee balloting is expected to make the election difficult to call on election night, and that uncertainty could lead to demonstrations from across the political spectrum. Protests can be expected as a strategy to put pressure on political and election officials, particularly in states where the election result is close or contested. As this scenario plays out, plausible concerns range from isolated violent incidents to an extended period of mass protests, violent confrontations and widespread property damage.

Jurisdictions are developing their own plans, processes and procedures in anticipation of election-related unrest—what works in one city might not work in another. Many public safety agencies have been planning ahead, closely monitoring information, setting up incident command rooms and limiting vacation around the election. And once again, the building sector must prepare for potential challenges should tensions escalate.

The chance of civil unrest during this election season is unusually high, and preparation is needed prior to a crisis. It may not matter which candidate wins or what the margin of victory is, and the potential for incidents could linger for an extended period of time. Property professionals are faced with yet another severe challenge, but they are in a unique position to help assure public safety. Preparation will prove invaluable: plan ahead, practice your plans, and coordinate with your BOMA local associations.

PLAN IN ADVANCE

Develop a Plan

Work with property management and security personnel to develop policies and procedures to prepare and respond to an incident. Determine when and how to implement additional protections and security, and when and how to initiate lockdown procedures. Specify a clear chain of command, including who within building management or ownership will make key decisions if necessary.

Review Your Property

Perform an inventory of possible problems, including property and building access points, glass windows and any potential projectiles. Review all fencing and lighting. Also confirm the exact locations of the property line and any easements, as trespassing may end up being an important consideration.

Work with Public Safety Authorities

Coordinate in advance with your local police department and other law enforcement groups.

Increased interaction will lead to better communication, better planning and, ideally, better results.

Involve law enforcement officials in your planning and drills. Offer your assistance; for instance, space can be offered to law enforcement to assist with their operations in the event of an incident. As is always a best practice, get to know public safety leaders now--an emergency is not the time to be making introductions.

Prepare for a Possible Lockdown

Have emergency kits and supplies available should a situation occur where it's not safe for employees to leave the property. Identify a safe refuge area away from windows that has a landline phone and cell phone coverage.

Be Ready to Communicate

Develop a communications plan and confirm your list of employees, tenants and vendors so you can communicate to the right individuals. Test your system for communicating, which must be operable at any time of day. And discuss how any press inquiries will be handled.

Practice the Plan

No matter how good your plans are, they won't work if they're not practiced. Hold tabletop exercises and physical rehearsals if possible, including building evacuations, with all employees, tenants and vendors; these can be held virtually for those who have not returned to work in the building.

PREPARING FOR AN INCIDENT

- Activate precautionary steps by increasing security measures and personnel; visible security can also act as a deterrent.
- Ensure that all recording devices, closed-circuit televisions and cameras are operational.
- Remove, repair or replace any loose items on or around the building that could be used as projectiles.
- Secure construction sites, trash dumpsters and outdoor property (e.g., tables, chairs, planters).
- Consider covering all ground-floor glass windows and doors.
- Secure the perimeter by implementing any access control procedures, such as closing selected entrances, manually checking IDs and posting additional signage.
- Alter the building's routine as appropriate, including shifting opening and closing times, encouraging telecommuting and coordinating with tenants on possible curfews.
- Consider parking alternatives; for instance, employees could park off-site, shuttle to the building and have security personnel escort them inside.
- Circulate security's phone number so tenants and employees can call for any assistance.

DURING AN INCIDENT

- Establish communication and share all safety-related details and updates with building tenants, customers and vendors.
- Actively monitor the news and social media for up-to-date information.
- Stay in contact with your chamber of commerce, downtown improvement district or other business associations.
- Announce which entrances and exits should be used during the event.
- Consider how to handle protesters entering the building; lockdown elevators if necessary.
- Be vigilant and plan to be an active observer: any unusual gathering should be monitored, noted and communicated, but do not attempt to make contact with demonstrators.
- Don't overreact: peaceful protests and marches are lawful First Amendment activities whether scheduled or spontaneous, and the vast majority of protests are peaceful.
- Determine when and how to lockdown or close a property. If necessary, make a shelter-in-place announcement, with the understanding that you may not have authority to prohibit tenants from leaving.
- Determine when to contact the police in the event of a crime or dangerous situation, if any individual is assaulted, property is damaged or trespassing becomes a threat.

**For more information on BOMA International
emergency preparedness resources, please visit:
www.boma.org**