Convoy Protests in Canada and Building Safety & Security

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The Ontario government recently declared a state of emergency in response to convoy protests and their impact on the movement of goods, people, and services.

While the hope is that the disruption will ease due to the threat of fines for non-compliances with a maximum penalty of $100,000, and up to a year imprisonment, it’s also time to ensure that our communities of buildings consider their current security and emergency preparedness status.

Building managers and owners have been prepared for a long time to respond to emergencies, operational interruptions, and more, but *what if you manage a building in a protest area*?

The Ottawa "freedom convoy" trucker protest has seen over 126 criminal investigations, and hundreds of property complaints.  It is believed that additional protest zones will pop up across Canada.  In fact, there are indications from protest groups on social media that they are planning to expand areas of demonstrations.

Leadership throughout the property management industry across Canada is strong, significant praise should be given to the front-line professional building managers and their teams.  They are working to ensure the safety of our “vertical” communities, and now find themselves in a potentially hazardous protest zone.

Most buildings in Canada have developed and implemented an emergency management plan to protect employees and occupants against common emergencies in both commercial and residential buildings.

Identifying how staff will respond to various types of emergencies, will assist property and facility managers alike, and their employees, during every phase of an emergency.  *How to respond, but more importantly, prevent, prepare for them, and possibly eliminate, or mitigate the impacts of those emergencies.*

Events , such as planned demonstrations, public disorder, property damage including building fires, and more that occur outside of the building can have  serious impact on both occupant safety and building operations.  While this  this is not an exhaustive list, this article will attempt to explain the considerations and actions to take if you manage a residential or commercial building in relation to an area that is under protest.

**“Defend in Place” and “Evacuation” Procedures.**

Ensure that building occupants and security staff are aware of their procedures in the event of an evacuation, or a  “defend / shelter in place.”

Sometimes it’s safer to be inside of a building, rather than outside.   A defend in place is typically communicated by municipal authorities and/or building management due to inclement weather conditions, hazardous material, incidents near a building, demonstrations and protests.

Your emergency response plan should address who at your building can authorize the “Defend In Place”? Who and how will they communicate this to staff, how will staff communicate this to occupants? What will we say? Ensure building staff are knowledgeable about the operation of the building emergency voice communication system connected to the fire alarm panel.  This system allows for mass communication to the building and is but one medium for occupant communications.  In addition, Occupants need to understand what to do when they are to “Defend In Place”.  This takes considerable preparation as building occupants must know what to do  - when an announcement is made.

How and when you communicate will also largely depend on whether you are protecting a commercial or residential property. Informing residents about upcoming/planned events, disruptions to local businesses, road closures, transit, etc. may provide residents an opportunity to leave for the duration of the event, if they have the availability to do so. If they manage a commercial property, Management teams should be engaged in regular communication with all stakeholders in their building. Employers and landlords have an obligation to ensure the safety of their employees, and their tenants will no doubt have to consider events occurring outside of their building, to ensure that their employees are safe; working remotely, temporarily relocating operations, etc.

**Building Staff and Personal Safety**

Ensure security, operations, and cleaning staff have been briefed on “personal” safety at the building, and to and from work.

Where are staff going to park?   Consider advising security staff not to wear their uniforms on the way to work so that they are not easily identified or targeted based on their attire.

All staff should be reminded that tensions are high, and the objective in any dealings with individuals on, or in relation, to the property should be focused on safety, de-escalation, professionalism coupled with patience.  Document this discussion with staff, as it addresses what was completed to protect employees in compliance with OHSA.

**Consider cancelling hazardous material deliveries**

At times of heightened risk at a building, cancel any deliveries of fuel and hazardous materials.

Refueling generator fuel tanks would be not appropriate, as this would cause the arrival of trucks containing large amounts of fuel that would sit adjacent to your building.

**Building Crime Prevention**

Consider reducing the number of building access points to one single point of entry.  This allows for the effective use of available security resources and to better protect the building and occupants.

The exterior lighting around a building is designed to keep the property safe, deter crime and unwanted behavior.  Security and building operations staff should be documenting daily inspections of the building’s exterior lighting to ensure all are functioning in an effort to maximize this protection.  Document this important step on behalf of the building’s risk management program.  If it is not documented, there is no proof of the hard work completed to protect staff and occupants.

**Building Air Intake Protection**

All building bring in fresh air through the “intake vents.”  These intake locations should be identified at a building and protected.  In some buildings, idling large diesel trucks close to these intake vents can cause hazardous/ unwanted airborne products to enter a building.

Consider training building security and operations staff on how to safely isolate the building air intakes in the event of an “airborne” hazard on the exterior of the building.  This can be done relatively quickly and safely via the building’s “automation system,” or manually at each rooftop unit or from the electrical disconnect.

This tactic has been successfully used to protect building occupants during both neighbouring building fires, protests (tear gas), and more, as a means of keeping the hazard outside of the building and everyone inside safe.

**Broken Windows and Being Prepared**

*While it’s never going to happen right?*Building owners and managers may want to consider having one or two sheets of plywood stored at the building to rapidly secure broken windows, restore and protect the building perimeter.

Consider walking through “how” building operations staff would effectively secure the plywood, to do as little damage to the frame as possible, and have the tools and equipment needed to complete this.  If you have time, this is a great exercise to do with your door service provider.

**Review Security Procedures with all building staff**

The operations, security and cleaning staff are a vital part of a building’s security program.

Emphasize that their eyes, ears and experience play a major role in identifying potential risks to the building during their daily movements throughout it.

Encourage staff to report anything that appears unsafe or suspicious.  Review with all staff the building’s emergency “lock down” procedure for perimeter access points and elevators.

**CCTV and Access Control Systems**

A critical tool available at most buildings are the CCTV and access control systems.

It is recommended that building managers verify that these systems are both operational and that there are no impairments.  Consider auditing the building’s service rooms containing critical infrastructure to ensure that they are locked and secured.

It’s an excellent time to complete an audit of the access control fobs / keys.  Document this step as evidence of a Manager’s proactive measure during times of heightened security risks.

**Physical Security Staffing**

As demonstrations and protests typically impact more than one building, there may be a drain on physical security providers during prolonged incidents.

Building managers should engage their security service providers to discuss potential staffing requirements and determine how fast they can be deployed along with any training needs that are required.

**Building Perimeter Safety**

Consider removing or securing exterior garbage cans, benches and “sandwich board signs” that may be damaged or used inappropriately.  Implement multiple building perimeter and above grade parking lot inspections daily.  This should be assigned to someone and documented.

Staff should be identifying and reporting any potential hazards identified such as vehicles parked next to the building, suspicious activity, evidence of past activity, hazards such as propane cylinders, gas cans, and loose items that could be used as projectiles or weapons.

**Occupant Communications**

Keep them informed.  Whether you manage a commercial, residential building or critical infrastructure facility, the occupants must be communicated to.

The communications to building occupants should be often, and focus on the following:

-       Owner / management is monitoring the situation and is aware of the potential impacts,

-       Management has taken precautionary safety and security measures and have activated their Emergency Response Plan.

- List of potential impacts, street closures, etc.

- Communication of emergency procedures and emergency contact information for the building and police, fire and EMS.

-       How occupants can help.  Reporting suspicious activity, personal safety when accessing the building, keeping windows closed, reporting noise complaints, etc.