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As pandemic continues, don't forget electrical maintenance - by Brian Leborgne

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We are all adjusting to our “new normal” amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. For many employees and businesses, that means working from home or on adjusted schedules instead of working in an office. And for building owners and facility managers, it means lower occupancy rates, reduced cleaning/maintenance staff, and shifted timelines for upgrades or regular maintenance. In fact, right now, Interstate is performing many planned equipment changes, upgrades, or additions for our clients since there is less disruption to tenants in the building. It is a great time to install germicidal UV lights, enhanced power for air filtration systems, or new equipment installation. However, among all of these improvements, it’s important not to lose sight of regular electrical maintenance.

There are several critical tasks that we recommend all commercial property owners complete on a regular basis, regardless of the building being at full capacity. The top two priorities are the fire alarm systems and emergency lighting systems, as these are invaluable in the case of an emergency. On a quarterly basis, we also recommend testing the generator and Automatic Transfer Switch (also called an ATS) to ensure it is functioning properly. Finally, the transformer and distribution connections should be checked regularly. Once per year, the main breakers from a distribution panel should be exercised.

The main distribution panel is generally the most important single component. This panel receives the electrical line from outside and feeds all the other panels in the building or on the property. It may seem like common sense, but it is vital that distribution panels remain clear of any debris or dust, which can impact performance or cause headaches down the road. Part of Interstate’s regular maintenance includes using thermal imaging on all breakers to help identify potential loose connections or other issues within the panel. Other components to check and maintain include the lighting controls, the fire alarm control panels, and any major networking components.

One thing that often gets overlooked in between maintenance visits is keeping the electrical room and surrounding area clean and secure. With reduced building occupancy, now is the perfect time to perform more in-depth checks and cleanups in and around electrical rooms. Though they are usually located in basements or other behind-the-scenes areas, it is important to keep electrical rooms just as clean as other parts of the building. It is critical that all components can be easily accessed at any time in case of an emergency. Additionally, property owners should ensure that unauthorized personnel are prevented from entering electrical rooms.

With many buildings at lower capacity, it’s also a great time to perform some of the longer-term maintenance items we recommend. This includes checking and updating panel schedules using a circuit tracer to ensure accurate diagrams and listings, exercising breakers to make sure none of them have locked up and flipping any that need to be flipped, and testing and replacing batteries in UPS battery backup systems.

Finally, we urge our clients to keep extensive records of work that has been done previously, especially with any updates or changes that are occurring during COVID-19. This is very helpful to

keep track of what's been done (and when) to either anticipate future issues or prevent duplicate work. For more information or to ask us any questions at all, please don't hesitate to get in touch!

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