



Change Orders at the NYCSCA How to Protect Your Company

LEGAL LOG

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It has been stated that there are over 5,000 outstanding, unresolved change orders pending at the New York City School Construction Authority ("SCA") totaling \$600-800 million dollars. Even if the actual number is only a fraction of that regrettable amount, it still means that hundreds of companies are being seriously harmed by the SCA's unacceptably slow resolution of extra work and other disputes. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that many SCA contractors and subcontractors are not properly protecting their rights against the SCA because they either: (1) do not know how to; or (2) are reluctant to do so for some other reason. The purpose here is to eliminate the former and facilitate the prompt and fair resolution of claims against the SCA.

Article 8, of the SCA General Conditions, entitled "Disputes," seems to protect the SCA by requiring a subcontractor claiming compensation for extra work to promptly comply with the SCA's direction to perform such work (NOD).

The SCA's General Conditions make no mention of, is that, under Public Authorities Law §1744, a contractor is precluded from bringing any lawsuit against the SCA unless: (1) it had submitted a detailed, written, verified notice of claim upon which such action is based to the SCA within three months after the accrual of such claim; and (2) a lawsuit is commenced within one year after the happening of the event upon which the claim is based.

Additionally, in Appendix "A" (21 NYCRR §9603.3) to the SCA's Standard General Conditions, the SCA "allows" contractors who have filed a Notice of Claim under §1744 to submit the matter to optional and non-binding mediation by submitting a written notice of dispute to the SCA's corporate secretary

within fifteen working days of the filing of the Notice of Claim.

G&C Commentary

The problem is that usually a contractor may not know that it even has a dispute until long after the time to submit a Verified Notice of Claim under §1744 has passed. Under the pertinent case law, the "accrual of a claim" against the SCA occurs when your "damages are ascertainable." The SCA could argue, therefore, that a contractor's claim for extra work accrues when it first submits its change order proposal. At that point, the damages appear to be known, since the proposal values the work. At the same time, however, a contractor will not know of a dispute until the SCA denies its change order proposal or offers an amount that cannot reasonably be accepted. Given the fact that there are hundreds of millions of dollars of unresolved change orders pending, this will undoubtedly take longer than the statutory three months in which one must submit a Verified Notice of Claim under §1744. Thus, as indicated, the time to submit a claim may pass before a contractor is even aware it has a dispute.

The Subcontractors Trade Association is currently seeking an amendment in Albany to Public Authorities Law §1744 to address this terribly unfair provision. The time to file claims against the SCA should and must run from a denial of a claim.

In the meantime, however, what should a contractor do to avoid waiving its claims against the SCA for extra work (or other claims)? First, the only safe way to protect your company is to immediately submit a Verified Notice of Claim to the SCA at the same time you first submit your change order proposal.

Second, you must carefully track the one year period within which you must commence a lawsuit against the SCA or forever waive your claim rights. Remember, this period runs from the date of the "happening of the event upon which the claim is based."

Additionally, initiating mediation (which, as indicated, is optional) will not toll the one year period within which you need to commence a lawsuit against the SCA, nor will any settlement discussions. Thus, always file within the strict time periods (thirty days for a Verified Notice of Claim; and one year to sue) regardless of the status of the SCA's review of your proposal. You can always withdraw or amend the lawsuit later as a result of a settlement.

Finally, two additional thoughts. First, a warning. Beware of "stealth" releases in the SCA change order settlement forms. Protect your schedule. Reserve your right to additional time and/or delay or acceleration claims to which you are independently entitled, in addition to compensation for extra work. Secondly do not let change order or other dispute-related processing drag on. Low ball offers from the SCA, not even worthy of a counter-offer, should mobilize you into action. Do not wait until economic circumstances compel you to accept a clearly inadequate offer. Be pro-active and protect your company!

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