



President's message: AIA N.Y. supports Mayor Bloomberg

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The AIA New York Chapter with over 4,000 members supports Mayor Bloomberg's efforts to reform the Buildings Department (DoB) in response to the tragic crane collapses and abuses of self certification privileges that has led to excess zoning bulk in a number of instances. However, we strongly oppose the proposal to repeal the requirement that the Commissioner of Buildings hold a professional license as an architect or engineer.

This is a time of unprecedented building activity in the city with over \$27.5 billion ongoing this year alone and even more planned for next year. In each of the past six years, the number of building permits for residential units has been comparable to the record last set in 1972 and has been almost double the annual amount filed in the thirty years in between.

Despite the administration's efforts to modernize the building code and rebuild the building's department, sadly, DoB has lacked the resources to keep pace with both the volume of construction, the rise in costs, and changes in building technology. But we cannot increase safety by lowering standards, and that's what the Administration proposes to do by changing the city Charter to permit a non-professional to oversee the department.

Forty years ago, the requirements for buildings commissioner were changed to mandate that the commissioner be a licensed architect or engineer in response to a rash of construction accidents not unlike those today. The administration now wants to change that, arguing what the department needs is a good manager, and that the license requirement prevents some talented construction professionals from being considered. The administration argues that any commissioner relies on the advice of experts, so the right DoB commissioner can do the same.

We disagree for several reasons. First is the New York state law itself. The requirement conveyed by an architecture or engineering license is the responsibility to apply the art and science of design and construction to buildings, structures and the spaces around them, while safeguarding life, health, property, and the public welfare. If that doesn't encompass the responsibilities of the buildings commissioner, what does?

A license means that the professional who holds it has gone through years of study, practical training, and continuing education. It means that they are held to a higher ethical standard than any political appointee, and egregious conduct can be punished by being forced to leave the profession, not just losing a job.

It would also send a terrible message to the DoB staff to lower professional standards just as we are demanding more of them today. The city council recently adopted major modernization of the building code, and the city planning commission has rezoned one sixth of the city to protect existing neighborhoods and promote new development where appropriate. Administering these provisions is a huge and complicated job. New York needs a professional with the training and experience to make the right calls on both design and safety.

No one would suggest that the health commissioner needn't be a doctor and the notion that the buildings commissioner can be a layperson is a risk that New York just can't afford.

The administration has said that it's a difficult job to fill, especially with only 18 months left to this administration. We're sure that's true, given the amount of work the next commissioner needs to do and the fact that agency funding hasn't kept pace with need.

Nonetheless, we know of any number of talented, qualified, licensed professional managers who have submitted their names for consideration, and we know there are many gifted licensed professionals already working for the NYC Departments of Design & Construction, Environmental Protection, Transportation, and others, as well as at the Buildings Department itself, available for consideration.

We urge the Mayor to reconsider this effort, and commit to the top-to-bottom reform and the resources DoB needs to implement it. We believe such a commitment will attract that extraordinary person the department requires, one with a license that gives New Yorkers confidence that the person is both trained and accountable. We and our colleagues in the construction industry are also committed to work with the administration to make this happen.

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