

32 Preapprove Emergency Inspectors

I. Summary

Issue:

The Department of Buildings has procedures to mobilize large numbers of public and private sector inspectors trained for post-disaster building assessments. There are opportunities to speed implementation and enhance capabilities by formalizing this program.

Recommendation:

The Department of Buildings should formalize its practices by creating a Preapproved Emergency Inspector Program through its “special inspector” program to assist the city during emergencies.

II. Proposed Legislation, Rule or Study

The Department of Buildings should preapprove and establish a list of Special Inspectors trained in post-disaster building assessment who will form the core of a Preapproved Emergency Inspector Program.

III. Supporting Information

Expanded Issue and Benefits:

Following Superstorm Sandy, the Department of Buildings (DOB) retained eight private consulting firms that supplied over 200 engineers who were teamed with department inspectors to perform over 80,000 structural building assessments for storm-related damage. This follows a longstanding practice of pairing city and private sector resources to enable critical inspections to occur quickly.

Firms are selected using the department’s contacts at many of the city’s large engineering firms, based on their expertise, staff availability, and severity of the event. Many of these private sector staff are already trained under the same programs as city inspectors, which is ATC 45 “Safety Evaluation of Buildings after Wind Storms and Floods.”

While the city already taps into private sector resources, a quality control process to prequalify these individuals would speed implementation of post-disaster assessments and could increase

capabilities. This proposal recommends that DOB formalize its existing post-disaster process by prequalifying post-disaster inspectors through its Special Inspector Program. Under the Special Inspector program, private consultants are responsible for confirming that certain construction work is being done in accordance with approved plans and specifications.ⁱ

Similar programs are in place in San Francisco and the State of California. San Francisco's Department of Building Inspection has a Building Occupancy Resumption Program (BORP), which it describes as a "precertified emergency inspection program to allow a quick and thorough evaluation of possible damage to a structure by qualified persons familiar with the structural design and life-safety systems of the building."ⁱⁱ In the BORP program, inspectors are pre-assigned to inspect specific buildings. Importantly, San Francisco has established criteria for these inspectors, which can be adapted by New York City (The San Francisco program is based upon ATC-20 "Post-Earthquake Safety Evaluation of Buildings").ⁱⁱⁱ

The State of California also has a Safety Assessment Program (SAP) managed by the California Emergency Management Agency. This program "utilizes volunteers and mutual aid resources to provide professional engineers and architects and certified building inspectors to assist local governments in safety evaluation of their built environment in an aftermath of a disaster." The SAP program requires design professionals to undergo specific training that is approved by the Department of Homeland Security and provides professional education credits to attendees.^{iv}

Implementation:

An amendment to the New York City Building Code typically requires input from all stakeholders, including the NYC Department of Buildings, the City Council and representatives of the real estate, design and construction industries.

The Task Force is advocating separately for the passage of a Good Samaritan law that would protect voluntary post-emergency architects and engineers from liability. If these Special Inspectors are compensated, the city will need to consider how their liability will be covered.

i. See http://www.nyc.gov/html/dob/html/development/special_insp_overview.shtml.

ii. The entire BORP emergency operations plan can be found at <http://www.sfdbi.org/Modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=772>.

iii. These criteria are:

1. Structural Inspectors
 - a. Current California license as a professional civil or structural engineer or architect
 - b. Relevant experience in the structural design and/or inspection of similar buildings
 - c. Proficiency in ATC-20 Detailed Evaluation Procedures
2. Elevator Inspectors
 - a. Employment by a firm engaged in elevator maintenance and installation as their primary business.
 - b. Familiarity with the building elevator installation
3. Life-safety System Inspectors (required for high-rise buildings)
 - a. Familiarity with building life-safety system

iv. For more information on the SAP program, see <http://www.calema.ca.gov/recovery/Pages/Safety-Assessment.aspx>.

Cost:

Turner Construction Company did not perform cost estimation for this proposal. The following analysis was provided by the authors of this proposal:

Given that DOB already has in place the administrative framework for registering Special Inspectors, and the city already hires consultants to participate in post-disaster assessments, the cost would amount to processing and validating additional applications from those design professionals desiring to participate in a post-disaster response program. The DOB could charge a *de minimis* processing fee for such applications, if necessary, to cover any additional costs but should be mindful that these inspectors would most likely be voluntary.