



AIA New York Chapter

The Founding Chapter of the American Institute of Architects

Hon. Simcha Felder, Chair, Governmental Operations Committee
City Council, City Hall
New York City

Dear Chair Felder and Members of the Governmental Operations Committee:

On behalf of the American Institute of Architects New York Chapter and its 4,200 members in New York, we are here in opposition to Intro 755. The Commissioner of the Department of Buildings must be a registered architect or professional engineer. The current law is logical and necessary.

By letters, e-mails and petitions, you have heard from many of your constituents about the reasons why the head of the agency that guarantees safety on construction sites must be trained and tested in how buildings come together, how they rise, and how they stand. The process by which an architect or engineer becomes licensed by the State of New York is arduous, arguably even harder than passing the bar exam in our State. It tests comprehensive knowledge of codes, zoning, building practices and environmental standards, to name but four of the many constituent issues that are important in neighborhoods from Co-op City to Gravesend, from Midwood to Central Harlem, from Ozone Park to East New York.

In addition to our technical training, architects, by law, are personally responsible for our work and have a fiduciary responsibility to maintain the health, safety, and welfare of the public. As licensed professionals, we bring to the task a special degree of commitment that we believe is crucial to the position of Buildings Commissioner.

The City Council has taken the lead in bringing a modern building code to the City of New York. We need an architect or engineer at the head of the department that interprets the code, guaranteeing building safety in all of our neighborhoods.

The City Council has taken the lead in stopping over-development in our communities, asking whether developer rapacity has led to deliberate misinterpretation of the Zoning Resolution. We need an architect or engineer at the head of the department that enforces the City's zoning, guaranteeing that political pressures and expediency do not engender neighborhood-busting mistakes.

The City Council, receiving testimony yesterday at the Housing & Buildings Committee, has taken the lead in pushing for progressive reform of Building Department operations, enforcement and communications, insisting that building practices be forcefully regulated. We need an architect or engineer at the head of the department that by its actions gives our communities appropriate scale and comfort, someone who knows about the economic and material determinants of buildings, not just how to manage a large and complicated bureaucracy.

The City Council, by Local Law and leadership in setting environmental priorities, has insisted that New York City attain a greener future and carbon footprint reduction by regulating building materials and construction processes. We need an architect or engineer at the head of the department that enforces these laws, and assures our children and our children's children that their future will not be green-wash rhetoric,

but actually achieve through aggressive action significant change in how our buildings help, not hurt, the environment.

There are some in this building who insist that the business of New York is business; that any agency, any department, can be run like a Fortune 500 company; that good management skills are more important than mere credentials, stale tradition, or a philosophy that knowledge matters. They are half right. This is not about tradition, or a return to the bow-tied past. This is not about credentials or elitism or silly glasses. This is all about professionalism, and the knowledge needed for the person heading the Buildings Department to make the tough decisions when there is nobody else to call, nobody else to consult.

You would not want your kids treated by doctors who learned their medical skills by watching Grey's Anatomy on television; you want the real thing for your children and for our Health Commissioner. You would not want the public defenders and advocates working over at Foley Square to have learned their legal skills watching re-runs of Law & Order; you want the real thing for your constituents and for our Corporation Counsel.

You cannot want the person who oversees all aspects of zoning, site safety and the quality of construction in our City to have borrowed their word choice from management case studies at Harvard Business School or Brooklyn College; you need the real thing for your neighbors and for our Building Commissioner.

I urge you to send this Intro back where it came, and, in so doing, to positively assert to the Mayor and the Deputy Mayor for Operations that the City Council and its Committee on Governmental Operations demands a Buildings Commissioner who not only knows how the government operates, but how buildings stand up.

Thank you.

Yours,

Fredric Bell, RA
Executive Director, AIA New York

cc: Council Member Joseph P. Addabbo, Jr. (District 32, Queens)
Council Member Inez E. Dickens (District 9, Manhattan)
Council Member Erik Martin Dilan (District 37, Brooklyn)
Council Member Dominic M. Recchia, Jr. (District 47, Brooklyn)
Council Member Larry B. Seabrook (District 12, Bronx)
Council Member Peter F. Vallone, Jr. (District 22, Queens)