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How New York Construction Got Safely Through COVID, According to the Experts And what still needs to be done

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Photo Credit: Commercial Observer

Construction industry experts and professionals spoke about the impact of the coronavirus on the construction industry for Commercial Observer's third annual [Construction Safety Forum](#) on May 6.

And everything — from new technology to cannabis consumption — was on the table.

Emerging Trends & Policies in Construction Safety

Melanie La Roca, commissioner of New York City's [Department of Buildings](#), kicked off the event by saying that construction in the coronavirus pandemic had seen decreased injuries and fatalities.

"This industry is resilient," La Roca said. "We are able to keep safety at the forefront... When we did come back, we saw incredible compliance in the industry."

She revealed the city's aggressive legislation campaign to bring more construction sites into safety compliance, by holding general contractors accountable for safety and increasing the [number of safety professionals at a site](#).

But panelists debated the proposed safety measures' effectiveness.

General contractors should not be looked to as the responsible party to solve an entire project's safety issues, **Tomasz P. Dering**, the corporate safety director at [Plaza Construction](#), said. He said he believed that subcontractors needed to be a part of safety enforcement.

COO of **Reidy Contracting Group LLC**, **Daniel Monteiro**, said his team employs a safety rating system for general contractors and subcontractors to inform managers of safety issues. **Ray Master**, head of environment health and safety at [Lendlease](#), joined Dering in emphasizing the importance of pre-planning for construction safety and that the responsibility to keep a site safe lay with the construction companies.

Reidy Contracting has monthly safety meetings, where their team discusses when to take safety precautions on a site and to educate senior and junior staff, Monteiro said. And post-project meetings allow teams to learn from mistakes, Master said.

The panelists also suggested that construction companies should work with insurance brokers to analyze and go over safety issues. One safety trend Dering identified was that thinner buildings with a smaller floor plate have higher risk of accidents. Master, who worked for an insurance broker before his current role, said broker and insurance carrier services should be tapped into more.

Increasing the presence of [safety consultants in buildings](#) is a measure in the right direction, said Dering, but he expressed concerns over the manpower that reform would take.

Safety guidance is constantly changing, said moderator **Sean Scuderi**, an attorney at [Tarter Krinsky & Drogin](#). The construction industry has had to adapt to changing state and federal guidance and the guidance of landlords at occupied buildings, he added.

Proof of vaccination, at least for working in occupied buildings, might be necessary as the city recovers, Monteiro said. He said Reidy Contracting and other construction firms are working to provide workers with incentives to vaccinate. Dering said the coronavirus posed a collective threat to workers.

“What is unique about this is if a person is not wearing a hardhat, they probably will get an injury [and] no one else around them [will],” Dering said. “In this case, if someone refuses to wear a respirator or a mask, they’re going to be exposing other people.”

“[Mask policies] need to be zero tolerance,” Monteiro said.

The panelists also discussed the recent legalization of cannabis in New York, arguing that without real-time testing, enforcement would be similar to normal site drug and alcohol policies. Because testing positive for cannabis does not necessarily mean a person is impaired, Dering said, testing becomes more complicated.

Technologies, like time-lapse photography analyzed to examine a project’s safety issues after the fact and better personal protective equipment like hardhats and harnesses, made the panelists more optimistic about site safety.

“We don’t look to technology as being a silver bullet in safety,” Master said. “We do focus on having a very strong foundational value of safety...[We] use technology to supplement that.”