



Emergency workers conduct search and rescue efforts at the site of a partially collapsed residential building in Surfside, near Miami Beach, Fla., on June 29, 2021. (Joe Skipper/Reuters)

VIEWPOINTS

The Florida Condo Collapse—Lots of Blame to Go Around

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Commentary

While politicians in Washington continue to play games with an urgently needed \$1 trillion infrastructure relief bill, the nation was hit full force with the cost of ignoring what needs to be rebuilt in this country.

The collapse of half the Champlain Towers South condo in Surfside, [Florida](#), should act as a red flag warning for us all. The trillion-dollar fix-it bill is pending because much of America, like the Champlain Towers, is in dire need of repair.

As tireless workers continue to comb through the wreckage in Florida, lawsuits have already been filed by survivors. By the time you read this, there will likely be more.

So far, the lawsuits point the finger of blame at the building's condominium association and its failure "to adequately secure the building, placing the lives and property of its occupants and visitors ... at risk resulting in the collapse of the building."

Indeed, the association was given an engineering report in 2018 which found "major structural damage" in the pool area and the underground parking garage. Immediate and costly repairs were indicated.

That's when many residents questioned paying pricey assessments to finance the \$9 million job. After all, at a Nov. 15, 2018, condo board meeting, Ross Prieto, a building official from the town of Surfside, had declared the building appeared to be "in very good shape." What were residents to think? They had bought their unit believing the building was sound. If there were dire construction issues to be addressed, surely they were the responsibility of someone else.

Then two months ago, the president of the association wrote her neighbors warning the "concrete deterioration is accelerating" and estimated the cost of repairs had jumped to more than \$16 million. No repairs were underway when the building pancaked, trapping some 160 people underneath tons of debris they used to call home.

But is the condo association to blame? What about the building managers, the local building inspectors, the architect or developer of the project, or the construction companies that installed what developed into visibly rotting rebar and crumbling concrete? Seems there is plenty of blame to go around and that fact will surely keep the litigation in court for years.

Gregg Schlesinger is a former construction project engineer and an attorney specializing in construction defects. He says the experts should have sounded the alarm.

“The building speaks to us,” he said. “It is telling us we have a serious problem.” Schlesinger maintains the building managers “kicked the can down the road. The maintenance was improper. These were all red flags that needed to be addressed. They weren’t.”

You’ve probably heard someone say, “Buildings in America don’t just fall down.” But they do, for a variety of reasons: older buildings not maintained, those with shoddy original design or construction, buildings with careless renovations and structures where building inspectors took bribes to look the other way when infractions were discovered. All occurred because someone didn’t do their job.

For too long, municipalities nationwide have put off repairing crumbling bridges, roads, dams, and other public services. If we didn’t realize it before now, we should certainly understand today that warnings from construction experts should not be ignored. Nor should the culpable be allowed to skate. Whether they are punished through the civil or criminal courts I don’t know, but these failures will continue until the responsible are held accountable.

Late last month in Washington, D.C., a pedestrian bridge suddenly gave way and fell onto a major freeway during the lunch rush. The collapse trapped a truck carrying 500 pounds of diesel fuel. Miraculously, only half a dozen people were injured.

Then recall the 13 who died and the 145 injured when a bridge in Minneapolis suddenly plummeted into the Mississippi River in 2007. Faulty gusset plates had been installed that simply could not hold the weight of the rush-hour traffic and construction equipment on the span that day.

While interested parties in Florida try to figure out who's to blame for the condo collapse, the rest of us might want to consider who should be held responsible for the next public works project that kills people. Is it municipal leaders who failed to find the necessary funding, or is it our partisan Congress that seems to be more interested in political posturing than keeping us safe?

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