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REPORT BARES CONSTRUCTION-SITE CRISIS

By BRUCE GOLDING

May 25, 2008 -- More than 80 percent of building plans submitted under the city's controversial "self-certification" program are plagued with zoning violations like those at the site of the deadly crane collapse, a recent crackdown has found.

The Department of Building's Professional Certification Review and Audit Team checked 662 plans between Sept. 17 and Jan. 31. Examiners issued objections against 556, or 84 percent. The DOB's Special Enforcement Team, which targets repeat offenders, audited another 207 plans during the same period and issued objections against 171, or 83 percent.

Critics say the findings show architects and engineers are running roughshod over the DOB, and that the department should discontinue the self-certification program.

"The problem is, close to 50 percent of all projects are permitted through self-certification," said Assemblyman James Brennan (D-Brooklyn). "It's an open door for non-compliance with the Building Code and Zoning Resolution."

The city started the program in 1995 to ease a backlog of pending permits. This year, almost 33,000 permits of more than 61,000 filed through April were self-certified.

The DOB randomly reviews 20 percent of self-certified plans, but controversy over abuse - most notably in fast-growing sections of Brooklyn - led Mayor Bloomberg to allocate \$6 million last year for three new investigative teams to crack down on bad builders and faulty applications.

The violations in 84 percent of cases represent a steep increase from the 59 percent uncovered for fiscal year 2001. An audit of those results by the Comptroller's Office found flaws in 67 percent, including "particularly disturbing" problems that the DOB had missed during its own review.

At that time, about 35 percent of permit applications were self-certified.

In a prepared statement, acting Buildings Commissioner Robert LiMandri said, "Through our

special enforcement plan, we are cracking down on bad actors by setting qualifications for professionals to self-certify and building cases against those who repeatedly break the rules."

bruce.golding@nypost.com