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Developers, Unions Differ on Crane Licensing Standards

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Federal guidelines could quiet the fight between city unions and developers over whether crane operators should have to pass a national exam or not.

Developers say the national exam is essential to making sure crane operators are meeting a higher standard. Unions argue crane operators need to be able to work in a dense environment that is unique to New York City and the exam should be kept local.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration is requiring that all crane operators pass a national exam by 2014 in order to be certified to operate a crane in the United States. According to experts in the field, the federal law will not supersede local regulations that are equal to or above and beyond the OSHA standards.

“There is no reason to put safety on hold until then,” said Steven Spinola, president of the Real Estate Board of New York, a group that represents some of the largest developers in the city. He supports the national exam, noting that crane operators currently do not have to be retested to keep their operating license while the national exam will require recertification every five years. Additionally, Spinola says a national exam would open up the field and allow crane operators from other cities to work in New York.

“We are concerned that if we are successful as a country...and start building again that we will run out of qualified crane operators,” Spinola said.

Local 14 of the International Union of Operating Engineers, however, has said previously that current New York City crane licensing standards are some of the most rigorous in the nation. They have also argued that passing a national exam would not ensure a crane operator has the expertise to maneuver in New York City.

Scott Orr, president of Paradise Crane Consultants, a New Mexico firm that investigates crane accidents and trains crane operators says both sides have a point.

“With its ports and subway systems, New York City has things that are characteristic to New York that you won’t find in Omaha,” he said. On the other hand Orr believes meeting a national standard is important. And, he notes, in some ways its moot since the new qualification standards by OSHA will take effect in 2014

The Bloomberg administration supports developers and says the national exam is only one component of beefing up certification rules. It also plans to institute a 40-hour course on city regulations, and require three years of experience, including two years working in New York or another dense urban environment.