

# As condo collapse death toll rises to 11, questions surface about the role of Surfside, Florida, building inspector

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A letter from the president of the Champlain Towers South Condominium Association in Surfside, Florida, sent in April of this year said that damage to the building's underground parking garage had "gotten significantly worse" since a consulting engineer's inspection report two and a half years prior.

While the 2018 report had warned that the decay of concrete and steel was related to a fundamental flaw in the original design and was approaching a critical point requiring prompt repair, a town inspector had informed residents that the building was in fact in good shape.

The sudden structural failure last week that sent much of the building to the ground early Thursday morning has left 11 people confirmed dead so far and more than 150 listed as missing. Rescuers have been using cranes, dogs, ultra-sensitive microphones and infrared scanners in the effort to identify survivors under the rubble of the 12-story tower. Little hope remains for the more than 150 occupants who are still unaccounted for.

The condo association president's letter explains that the many millions of dollars in needed repairs had been a subject of frustration among residents: "We have discussed, debated, and argued for years now, and will continue to do so for years to come as different items come into play," it said.

The April 9 letter was obtained by *USA TODAY* from a family member of two building residents missing since Thursday's collapse and made public on Monday. The author, Jean Wodnicki, president of the association's board of directors, survived Thursday's collapse, a condo association attorney told the media.

Over seven pages, Wodnicki reviews the major repairs that were pending. She noted that in the fall of 2018, as documents previously released by the town of Surfside show, the association hired engineering firm Morabito

Consultants to inspect the building.

That report, which was signed and sealed by structural engineer Frank Morabito, stated, "The main issue with this building structure is that the entrance drive/pool deck/planter waterproofing is laid on a flat structure. Since the reinforced concrete slab is not sloped to drain, the water sits on the waterproofing until it evaporates."

Morabito's report was clear and unambiguous. Acknowledging that his approach was different from and, in fact, in contradiction to the view of other architects, engineers and contractors who had worked on the building, Morabito explained the scientific logic of his argument.

Concrete is porous and unless it is protected, water penetrates through it to carry chloride solutions to the reinforcing steel causing corrosion. If not corrected, this will result in failure. If a slab does not drain, the pooling water will find the inevitable weak points in the waterproofing layer where minute leaks expand to concentrate the processes that lead to corrosion and failure.

Morabito continued, "This is a major error in the development of the original contract documents prepared by William M Friedman and associates architects Inc. and Breiterman Jurado & Associates, Consulting Engineers."

His report acknowledged that the necessary repairs to this critical structural slab of the building would be disruptive and very expensive. Furthermore, Morabito explained in detail what had to be done, proposing a system that would "assure that all water that penetrates to the waterproofing layer will be able to flow freely to the deck drains, resulting in an extended life for the replacement waterproofing membrane. This system also provides expert extra protection for the existing reinforced concrete structure and allows future membrane

repair/replacement to be completed more economically.”

Moreover, he made a blunt warning that if the problems he had identified were not repaired promptly, they would in the “near future...cause the extent of the concrete deterioration to expand exponentially.” Wodnicki’s letter confirmed his tragic prediction.

In another apparent confirmation of Morabito’s concerns, Mike Stratton told NBC News that he was on the phone with his wife, Cassondra Billedeau-Stratton, 40, who was in their fourth-floor apartment when the collapse happened. She had worriedly called her husband to report that a sinkhole had opened up underneath the condo’s pool before the call cut out. Billedeau-Stratton is still among those missing in the wreckage.

If members of the condominium association were confused about the importance of taking prompt action in 2018, a large part of the responsibility for that rests with then-Surfside Building Official Ross Prieto, the building inspector who met with them to discuss Morabito’s findings. According to the documentary record of the meeting that was released on Monday, the town official told the board that the building was “in very good shape” after reviewing the engineer’s report.

In an e-mail from Prieto to the town manager at the time, which has also been released, Prieto said the meeting “went very well. The response was very positive from everyone in the room. All main concerns over their 40 year recertification process were addressed.”

Prieto is no longer employed with the town, having left his position in 2020 and has not been available for comment other than to report via the *Miami Herald* that he did not remember getting the report in question.

Miami-Dade and Broward County ordinances require that all such towers obtain a recertification after 40 years. Morabito’s report was the first step in that process.

Prieto met with the Champlain Tower South Condominium Association on November 15, 2018, according to NPR. The outlet obtained the minutes from the meeting and reported that Prieto expressed optimism about the condition of the tower condo. The minutes of the meeting reportedly include that Prieto had reviewed the “structural engineer report” and that it “appears the building is in very good shape.”

Champlain Tower South resident Susana Alvarez, who attended that meeting, told NPR that officials had reassured them their building was safe: “I want you to know that in 2018, we had a board meeting. And we sat there with the town of Surfside. And the town of Surfside said to us that the building was not in bad shape, that the

building was not in bad shape. That is what they said, OK? The structural engineer has been around for a while. We took out \$15 million to fix that building at his say-so. No one ever, ever, ever told us that this—that that building was in such bad shape—no one, no one.”

Prieto has been working in the construction industry for several decades. According to public records on the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation website, he has been a licensed general contractor since at least 1991. Prieto received a license as a certified roofing contractor in 1996.

He has also been certified as an inspector since the mid-1990s. Prieto received both “Standard Inspector” and “Standard Roofing Inspector” licenses in 1997. His current “Building Code Administrator” license has been active since November 2006.

Notably, Prieto was the assistant director of building and zoning for the village of Miami Shores, Florida, when the Biscayne Kennel Club collapsed in 1997 during a construction project, killing two workers.

Prieto told the Associated Press after the deadly incident that inspectors had visited the project several times and “everything was going according to plan.” He added, “From what I hear, this is just a construction accident. Accidents can happen.” He also told the *Sun-Sentinel* that he had visited the dog track project on inspections “three or four times.”

Prieto was most recently working for the city of Doral, Florida, which is also within Miami-Dade County. He was serving as an interim building official, CNN reported. A county document listing “Building Officials” included Prieto’s name for the city of Doral. The list was last updated on May 13, 2021.



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