

BUCK STOPS WITH ME' IN DEUTSCHE BLAZE, NOT SCOPPETTA, BLOOMBERG INSISTS

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Fire commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta got a thumbs up from his boss on Tuesday - 24 hours after prosecutors blasted him for dropping the ball in the disastrous Deutsche Bank fire.

"Nick Scoppetta is somebody who's a public servant for this city for many, many years and something that happens at one level, you can't just take it all the way up to the top level and always go fire the top guy," Mayor Bloomberg said.

Scoppetta's poor performance surfaced in a 32-page report issued by Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau. It blasted the Fire and Buildings departments for their failures before the Aug. 18, 2007, blaze that killed two firefighters.

Morgenthau noted that in May 2007, Scoppetta inspected a firehouse after a 15-foot pipe fell off the tower and pierced its roof. The commissioner did not order an inspection of the tower.

That contention is backed up by Steven Rabinowitz, a lawyer representing 30 fire officers who spoke to prosecutors.

"Scoppetta never said to anyone I represented, 'You better get in that building and make sure everything is kosher,'" he recalled.

An inspection after the pipe fell would have discovered a broken standpipe and blocked stairways that three months later contributed to the deaths of Firefighters Robert Beddia and Joseph Graffagnino.

On Monday, the mayor released a statement saying the city took responsibility "for the inspectional and enforcement failures by its agencies."

Yesterday, Bloomberg said ultimately he's the one who must be held accountable for failures at the bank tower.

"If you want to do that, the buck stops with me, not with Nick Scoppetta," he said.

The mayor said the city would launch a "disciplinary investigation" to see if any city employee merits punishment. He said he delayed that probe at Morgenthau's request.

A mayoral spokesman said the report would be "a starting point" to determine "what, if any, disciplinary or other action to take with respect to individuals at any of the agencies involved in the failures that occurred here."

Morgenthau also criticized the Buildings Department. Months before the fire, the department replaced experienced inspectors on site with "inexperienced" inspectors.

Those inspectors never saw that a standpipe that could bring water to the upper floors was broken and stairways were blocked with plywood. Both factors proved deadly.