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Boulevard hotel construction company cited

by **Paul J. Nyden**
Staff writer

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- The federal Occupational Health and Safety Administration has issued citations to Hi-Tech Electric Inc. for seven "serious" safety violations at the Courtyard by Marriott construction site on Kanawha Boulevard in downtown Charleston.

OSHA ordered Hi-Tech to pay \$9,000 in fines for those violations. The citations, issued July 26, were based on inspections at the worksite between May 7 and 13.

Based in Ashland, Ky., Hi-Tech Electric employs non-union employees under its contract with VIM Inc., the main developer at the hotel-construction site, located near the intersection of the Elk and Kanawha rivers.

Tom Fuller, a project manager at the company's Ashland offices, would not comment.

"That would be something to go through the owner. He is not in the office right now. He is not in here a whole lot. He has a telephone number, but you're not getting that," Fuller said. He also would not provide the owner's name.

Robert Layman, president of Hi-Tech Electric, did not return a telephone message left for him with Fuller. Layman also did not respond to written questions sent to his email address on Hi-Tech's website.

The OSHA violations included:

- * "Employees were not wearing protective gloves ... when using the Cantax Conduit Solvent Cement that is a skin irritant" that can cause dermatitis.
- * "Employees were not provided safety glasses on site while working close to trench digging operations."

The federal citations focused on safety hazards related to laying pipe in deep and narrow dirt trenches:

- * There were "employees working in a vertical walled trench, with a maximum depth of 77 inches, with no protective system in place to prevent a cave-in."
- * "The employer did not provide a safe means of egress at least every 25 feet for employees working in a trench that was 77 inches deep."
- * "Excavated dirt and rocks that were not secured by a retaining device were not kept at least two feet back from the edge of a trench that employees were working in to prevent the materials from falling or rolling into the trench."
- * "A competent person ... knowledgeable in excavation safety was not on site conducting inspections to identify the hazards found with a 77-inch-deep trench that employees were working in, including the lack of cave-in protection."

Steve White, executive director of the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation, an AFL-CIO affiliate, said wooden or metal structures, which are carefully braced, are routinely used in deep trenches to keep them from collapsing on workers.

"Why is Hi-Tech requiring its workers to cut corners?" White asked.

"These violations broke the rules you would learn in Safety 101. Perhaps the most important rule is to never go into a trench that does not have shoring. That is like playing Russian roulette.

"This is a poor way to do business. We all have to be competitive. But we shouldn't be risking people's lives," White said Wednesday.

Jessica Stadd, a Marriott International public relations official in Bethesda, Md., said Friday that she could not comment on the construction project.

VIM Inc., which stands for "Virginia Inn Management," is the developer of the Courtyard by Marriott project. VIM accepts bids and chooses the contractors hired to work on the construction site.

Charles H. Wendell, who owns VIM, did not return telephone messages left at his company's office in Fayetteville on Wednesday and last Friday. Wendell also did not return telephone messages left at his Charleston, S.C., office on those two days.

Earlier this year, a complaint was filed in Cabell County Magistrate Court against Hi-Tech Electric for failing to pay wages promptly to its workers at its Hampton Inn construction project in Kinetic Park.

Fuller said, "That doesn't matter. The Huntington project is paid for and done. We got paid for it and we're off the job."

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