

NEWS

Seismic retrofit incentives put off until spring

By **LEETA-ROSE BALLESTER** | Bay Area News Group

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A proposal to incentivize seismic retrofit of soft-story buildings in San Jose has been placed on the list for discussion at the next Council Priority Setting Session in February.

There are some 1,093 soft-story buildings in San Jose, with 10,923 units that house more than 27,000 people, according to a 2003 survey for the Santa Clara County Emergency Preparedness Council.

Howard Cook, owner of Bay Area Retrofit, said soft-story buildings are characterized by expansive carports underneath that have little support on the sides.

These are often apartment buildings or condominiums built in the 1970s or businesses with ground-level parking underneath.

“When it starts to roll back and forth, it’s not going to make it,” he said.

Force generated by the motion of an earthquake sends seismic energy upward and into the structure of a building. Force should transfer through the structure and back down toward the ground, but a soft-story structure is too weak and can potentially collapse.

His company has done extensive soft-story work in both San Francisco and Berkeley, but none in San Jose, although he has done other types of seismic retrofits on homes here.

“There’s been little done [anywhere] until it’s mandated,” Cook said.

The San Jose soft-story incentive plan, proposed by council members Sam Liccardo, Rose Herrera and Johnny Khamis, wouldn’t be mandated but would serve as a way for property owners to ease the expense of potentially costly retrofits.

A memorandum shared with council Oct. 16 outlines a plan to create a city- or county-wide program that allowing for bond financing for participating properties.

Property owners would have the option to finance the capital costs of the improvement through their property tax bill. Permits and inspection fees would also be waived.

Cook said that while the permit fees are minimal, the cost of an actual seismic retrofit can vary tremendously, especially because there are so few engineers in the business.

He said retrofitting a four-unit building could run about \$30,000, but there are many variables when it comes to costs.

Liccardo said it is time for the city to move forward with addressing earthquake readiness.

“All of us share responsibility for preparing for the next big one,” he said. “Developing a unique set of incentives and financing mechanisms, while working in conjunction with property owners and industry representatives, is a step in the right direction to tackling this inevitable event.”

In a large earthquake along the Hayward or San Andreas faults, in which San Jose is nestled, soft-story residential buildings will constitute two-thirds of the housing rendered uninhabitable as a result of the quake, according to modeling by the Association of Bay Area Governments.

San Francisco addressed the issue by allowing property owners to raise rents on units that were retrofitted.

Berkeley offers a Seismic Retrofit Refund Program which allows for up to one-third of the that city’s real property transfer

tax to be refunded for voluntary eligible seismic upgrades to residential property. Council officials decided Oct. 16 to place the proposal on the Council Priority Setting Session in February. Council will go through a list of potential ordinance changes that were brought to Rules and Open Government Committee and Council meetings. They then vote on their top 10 to address, or however many slots are available.



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