

Bond aims to strengthen quake-vulnerable homes

Erin Sherbert, San Francisco Examiner, 5-2-10

Affordable housing units vulnerable to collapse in the event of a major earthquake could get a boost today when Mayor Gavin Newsom unveils a proposal for a \$38.1 million bond to pay for retrofits.

Studies have shown that there are as many as 4,400 soft-story buildings in San Francisco. Soft-story buildings are multilevel structures with large openings on the ground floor, either garages or commercial spaces, that are less likely to sustain a major temblor.

“We have a responsibility to do everything we can to see that these buildings withstand the next major earthquake, and this bond will help ensure these retrofits happen, regardless of the tenants’ income,” Newsom said. “We’re up against the clock on this with people’s lives and properties at stake.”

The proposed bond money, which would have to be approved by voters in November, is only enough to upgrade the estimated 125 affordable-housing units in need of seismic retrofitting.

Newsom also is proposing to create a Mello-Roos — a financial district that would help developers receive loans to pay for the remaining properties that need retrofitting.

The bond is part of the mayor’s larger effort to make it mandatory for all soft-story buildings to be seismically upgraded. This year, Newsom created a program for property owners to voluntarily retrofit such buildings, with incentives such as expedited permitting attached. That program went into effect in April.

But with heightened concerns about the next big earthquake, The City cannot wait for property owners to voluntarily make upgrades, which can cost between \$79,000 and \$132,000, according to the Mayor’s Office.

That’s why Newsom appointed a task force to come up with a set of standards mandating property owners to upgrade soft-story buildings.

“We are trying to make sure our city could be resilient after a disaster,” said Sarah Karlinsky, deputy director for San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association, a public policy think tank. “We don’t want to end up like New Orleans after [Hurricane] Katrina.”

The mayor will present his plan at the Capital Planning Committee meeting today.