

Prop. A seismic retrofit bond would aid some

Jessica Kwong, San Francisco Chronicle, 10-4-10

It's not a question of if, but when the next major earthquake will shake seismically vulnerable San Francisco.

On these grounds, proponents are pushing for Proposition A, a bond measure that would authorize the city to issue up to \$46.2 million in deferred loans and grants for seismic retrofits to multistory wood structures at significant risk of damage or collapse during an earthquake.

The Earthquake Retrofit Bond addresses concerns that emerged from a February 2009 report by the San Francisco Department of Building Inspection titled, "Here Today - Here Tomorrow: Earthquake Safety for Soft-Story Buildings."

According to the report, the city has approximately 2,800 "soft-story buildings" constructed before 1974. These are buildings that have three or more stories and large wall openings at the base, such as garage doors and windows.

Damages to multiunit, wood-frame soft-story buildings in the Marina district after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake are proof - the buildings aren't cut out to withstand tremors.

Soft-story structures that qualify for the proposed bond measure include 125 affordable housing units funded by the mayor's Office of Housing, the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and 31 privately-owned single-room occupancy hotels.

Fixing these vulnerable buildings now would reduce the potential for structural collapse ahead of time, said Fire Chief Joanne Hayes-White.

"In the event of large-scale disaster, our resources will be significantly challenged, so the more proactive we are, the better off we'll be," she said.

Members of the San Francisco Republican Party oppose the proposition.

Terence Faulkner, 66, a member of the San Francisco Republican Party County Central Committee, referred to the owners of buildings that have not been retrofitted as "slumlords" who should finance their own seismic upgrades.

"In many cases, they are needy millionaires who want the public to pay for the repair of their buildings," he said. "What they're really entitled to in some cases is a red tag on their building for being a danger to public safety."

But Jason Elliott, a Prop. A proponent who also serves as the mayor's policy adviser, said issuing the grants and loans makes sense because the city has a very strong bond rating. "That allows us to sell these infrastructure bonds at a very competitive interest rate, which means it's cheaper for the voters at the end of the day," Elliot said.

The proposition, which requires a two-thirds vote from the public for approval on Nov. 2, centers on an issue the city values and created a task force to look into, said Sarah Karlinsky, deputy director of the non-partisan

think tank San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association.

"If this ballot measure isn't passed ... we are at risk of having many San Franciscans hurt or displaced in a major earthquake and that's not the kind of city that I want to live in," she said. "I want to live in a city where we take care of our people."