

Quake danger -- lawmaker calls on state to boost funding for fault maps

Rong-Gong Lin II and Rosanna Xia, Los Angeles Times, 12-30-13

A state lawmaker Monday called on his colleagues to boost funding immediately to map known active earthquake faults, a safety measure that would keep new construction from being built atop or too close to dangerous faults.

"Allowing buildings that house large numbers of people to be built on or near fault lines is not acceptable," said state Sen. Ted W. Lieu (D-Torrance).

His remarks came after The Times on Monday reported that at least 18 buildings were constructed on or near the Hollywood and Santa Monica faults over the last decade without the rigorous studies that would have been required had the state zoned the two faults. Both faults are well known and capable of producing disastrous earthquakes.

The state's efforts to map active earthquake faults have slowed to a crawl, with many dangerous faults still undocumented. Between 1974 and 1991, California aggressively mapped 534 maps. Then, a series of budget cuts slowed the effort dramatically. Only 23 have been drawn since 1991.

About 300 more maps need to be drawn — including some in heavily populated areas in Southern California. That represents about 2,000 miles of faults statewide.

The slow pace affects public safety. State law bans new construction on top of the fissures because previous quakes have shown that buildings can be severely damaged during violent shaking.

If the faults aren't mapped, there's no requirement to enforce the state law at those locations.

"It boggles my mind," Lieu said. "Every day across California, local planning departments are making decisions, and we need to make sure that no future buildings are going to be built on fault lines simply because a map wasn't updated."

In a letter Monday to Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, Lieu wrote that the state's budget situation has improved in the last few years, and a portion of the budget surplus should be "used immediately to update and map fault lines across California. Lives are at stake."

Los Angeles' regulation of development along faults came under increased scrutiny this year from residents and state officials when the City Council approved the controversial Millennium Hollywood skyscraper project on a site very close to the Hollywood fault. The city did require some seismic testing but no underground trenching to determine whether the fault ran under the site.

Amid questions over the safety of the development, the city has now ordered a full trench study, and zoning around the Hollywood fault will be completed by 2014, according to state officials.

State geologist John Parrish said there are still many faults in populated areas that need to be mapped, including the Santa Monica fault and faults in San Diego Harbor, Yorba Linda, and the San Gabriel and Pomona valleys.

"If you don't know what's there, then it's easy to just ignore it," Parrish said. "That's why the Legislature set it up that they be zoned — to make local planning departments aware of these high-hazard areas."

The state geologist's budget has dropped from \$9.1 million in 2001 to \$2.9 million for the current fiscal year. Parrish said his office scraped up funding from its existing budget to restart the mapping program last year, though he said progress has been slow.

"We try to perform as best we can do," Parrish said.