

Identifying apartments at risk in quakes could take more than a year

29,000 apartment buildings identified as constructed before 1978, more would have to be examined on site, Los Angeles officials say.

By Xia and Ron-Gong Lin II, Los Angeles Times, 11-27-13

Los Angeles city building officials have concluded that it would take inspectors more than a year to identify apartment buildings in the city that have a certain type of wood frame that is vulnerable to collapse in an earthquake.

City engineers developed a plan to winnow out these so-called soft story wood-frame buildings among the thousands of apartment buildings across the city that were built before 1978, Ifa Kashefi, chief of the engineering bureau of the Department of Building and Safety, wrote in a report submitted to a City Council planning committee.

Officials have long known about the risk of soft-story buildings, particularly after the 1994 Northridge earthquake, when about 200 of these structures were seriously damaged or destroyed, and 16 people died at the Ge Meadows apartment complex.

Soft-story structures are often built over carports and held up with slender columns, leaving the upper floors vulnerable to ground-floor apartments during shaking. No city data exist to easily identify which structures are soft-storied and soft-story, Kashefi said.

The city's housing department provided addresses for 29,226 apartment buildings in the city built before 1978, according to Kashefi's report. Staffers would then use mapping programs to narrow down which apartment buildings need further field inspection.

The report estimates that 20% of the 29,226, or about 5,800 buildings, will be soft-story buildings, and an additional 11,690 buildings will need to be inspected on site to determine whether they are soft-story buildings.

An inspector would be able to examine about 30 buildings per day, according to the report, and the overall project would take about one year and several months, a department spokesman said. The report provides a checklist of things an inspector would look for in surveying these buildings.

The bill, introduced in July by City Councilman Tom LaBonge, asks building officials to present a plan by which the city would be able to identify wood-frame soft-story residential buildings with at least two stories and at least five units that were built before 1978.

er has said it's unreasonable to imply create an "unfunded mandate" without looking into financing for property owners. A statewide bond program may be the way to help property owners finance retrofitting, LaBonge said

ion was continued to the first quarter of next year. The public safety committee also continued to support Mayor LaBonge's motions for a monthly earthquake drill and an update on the city's earthquake preparedness efforts