

Hollywood Earthquake Fault -- Why Residents Should Care

Gracie Zheng, LA Weekly, 10-14-13

Despite controversy over the L.A. City Council's approval of the Millennium skyscrapers, a project that would either straddle or sit next to the Hollywood Fault, residents here are mostly in the dark about their proximity to the 10-mile-long "rupture zone," which is capable of splitting buildings in half during a quake.

A common reaction among a few residents *L.A. Weekly* spoke to was that, even if traces -- meaning old ruptures -- of the active fault run under and around their homes, and even if the California State Geologist says that's alarming, doesn't the entire state sit on a giant earthquake fault?

Not exactly. This fault is capable of ripping the earth's surface on an east-west pathway north of Hollywood Boulevard and south of the Hollywood Hills with a magnitude 7 temblor.

That is not your typical California fault. Yet until this summer, it was one of the city's great secrets, well-known to one group: geologists.

We spoke about how this could be to Michael Woo, who represented Hollywood for eight years as city councilman and was later on the L.A. Planning Commission when it approved the \$200 million Blvd6200 complex in 2007. (In above photo, Blvd6200 is under construction -- it borders Carlos Avenue, which geologists believe is within, or alongside, the fault zone.)

Woo tells us that when he was briefed on Blvd6200 as the Planning Commission considered and then approved Blvd6200 in 2007, "the earthquake issues were never brought up" by top city employees -- or anyone else.

And many residents are just now learning of the fault.

Eric Berg, 39, a television art director, has lived for two years just north of the intersection of Carlos and Vista Del Mar, and falls fully within the fault zone mapped by USC earth sciences professor James Dolan and a team of scientists in 1997.

Berg isn't terribly concerned about the potential safety issue. "I don't really know much about how far this is spread out and if something happens here how far would the damage go," he says.

Some feel safe because, in modernity, no devastating quake has hit Hollywood. The last time, after all, was more than 7,000 years ago.

Geologists shake their heads. That's a long time for human civilization, but a blink on Earth's time scale.

Abrahams, who lives in the Hollywood Hills and is among those suing the city and developer to overturn approval of the Millennium twin skyscrapers, says not enough Hollywood people are paying attention to the geology beneath them.

(The *Los Angeles Times* reported on Sunday that more than 1,000 poorly reinforced older concrete buildings in L.A. may be at risk for collapse in a quake, and that Hollywood has a particularly high concentration of them. [Please also see L.A. Weekly's coverage of this phenomenon in 2011 in "The First 15 Minutes After the Big One."](#))

"I think everyone within at least a quarter-mile of each side of the fault line should be informed" by the

authorities, says Abrahams.

The *Wall Street Journal* and other major media picked up the story about the Hollywood Fault many weeks ago, after the L.A. City Council approved the Millennium twin skyscrapers, 35 and 39 stories high. California state law prohibits new buildings from being constructed immediately adjacent to, or on top of, earthquake faults.

But the issue remains theoretical among those living in the quake zone.

"We wouldn't think about it until there is a problem, sort of like people on a flood plain in Louisiana. Then all of a sudden, floods. And everything is ruined," Berg says.

To save lives, the Alquist-Priolo Earthquake Fault Zoning Act was signed into law in California in 1972. It says new buildings for human occupancy in California should be at least 50 feet from an identified earthquake fault.

Detailed geological maps show that the Hollywood Fault's "traces" are near Franklin Avenue, Yucca Street, Carlos Avenue, Las Palmas Avenue and several other heavily populated streets.

Due to budget constraints, for many years the state didn't map the Hollywood Fault, though it has mapped hundreds of faults. Much of the fault is still just dotted lines on incomplete geological maps.

To complete an accurate map that pinpoints the actual fault, geologists must dig trenches in the earth. Because that work was never completed, the Hollywood Fault could not be included by the State of California in the regulatory Alquist-Priolo Earthquake Fault Zones, according to State Geologist John Parrish.

And that created a legal and political gray area: Could the City of Los Angeles get around the Alquist-Priolo Act, and approve new buildings near -- even atop -- an active fault, as long as there was no regulatory map telling city officials precisely where the Hollywood Fault ran?

For several years, L.A. City Geologist Dana Prevost and other top Department of Building and Safety employees recommended Hollywood projects without doing the work needed to create detailed maps showing the precise location of the old fault ruptures.

Based on their recommendations, in 2007 the City Council approved Blvd6200. Former City Councilman Woo, now dean of the College of Environmental Design at Cal Poly Pomona, was on the L.A. Planning Commission at the time.

Woo explains the thinking going on within City Hall:

"Up until now, the usual city process has not followed closely the existence of major fault lines," concedes Woo, who was appointed by Villaraigosa to the City Planning Commission from 2005 to 2012.

"In other words, we haven't had the research, and developers have not been required to provide the level of specific detail, that now has come to public attention."

"The Department of Building and Safety's geologist felt that project was far enough away that it would not require a surface rupture study," says Luke Zamperini, Building and Safety spokesman.

Zamperini says officials relied on the 2010 Fault Activity Map of California, created by the California Geological Survey, to judge Blvd6200's project site distance from the Hollywood Fault.

"The northern edge of [Blvd6200] is at least 500 or 600 feet away from where we think the fault trace is," says

Zamperini.

That's not solid science. The 2010 state map they used to come up with those distance estimates is a vague locator map of fault traces, and was never intended to be detailed enough to zoom in to street level to locate real fault lines, says State Geologist Parrish's spokesman Don Drysdale.

Drysdale says cities cannot use the 2010 map to decide the distance between a project and a fault for good reason: the map's scale is 1 inch to 12 miles, which is too small-scale.

Regulatory maps used by geologists to show an actual fault location apply a scale of 1 inch to 2,000 feet.

But Building and Safety -- using the 1 inch/12 miles map -- deemed Blvd6200 to be at least 500 feet from the fault. And since the department requires developers to perform fault studies only if a project "falls within 500 feet each direction" of an earthquake fault, Zamperini says, no seismic study was needed.

Ed Johnson, spokesman for L.A. City Council President Herb Wesson, declined comment on the City Council approvals of Blvd6200 and the Millennium towers, saying that Hollywood developments are "not an issue in our district." Wesson's council district includes Mid-City, Koreatown, Leimert Park and other areas.

In July, Parrish wrote a letter to Wesson and the City Council, warning them that they "must withhold development permits" until geological investigations prove that proposed projects are safe from earthquake faults. A few days later, the City Council approved the Millennium skyscrapers in concept, but has yet to issue permits.

Parrish tells *LA Weekly* that Los Angeles is one of the few California cities that still has its own city geologist to advise it on geological and fault issues.

"Because the City recognized the importance of knowing where active faults were, it took the initiative several decades ago and mapped the location where it believed the Hollywood Fault to be, from information current at that time," says Parrish via email.

But now, in what is seen by some as a vote of no confidence in Los Angeles City Hall and the Department of Building and Safety, Parrish is leading a team of geologists who are digging trenches in Hollywood to pinpoint the fault traces.

Mayor Eric Garcetti, who represented Hollywood as a City Councilman for many years before becoming mayor, did not make an issue of the Hollywood Fault before backing the Millennium project and Blvd6200.

Garcetti's spokesman, Jeff Millman, queried by the *Weekly* about Garcetti's voting record, did not directly respond to the paper's question. He instead discussed how City Hall is now trying hard to find out where the Hollywood Fault is:

"While the City has approved the project's design and concept, the City's Department of Building and Safety has directed Millennium to conduct trenching that will be reviewed by the department's geologist. The state is also mapping the area for any active faults. The city will not permit the construction of new buildings on top of active faults."

In another twist, Hollywood resident Abrahams has filed a complaint with the City Ethics Commission against Raymond Chan, interim general manager of the Department of Building and Safety.

The September 6 complaint alleges that Chan violated "conflicts of interest, money laundering and ethics rules"

because his son Jeremy Chan "had a business relationship with the law firm of Sheppard Mullin," lobbyist for the Millennium project. Jeremy Chan, a law student at Southwestern Law School in L.A., worked as a paid student intern at Sheppard Mullin from January to May 2013, as confirmed by Jerry Neuman at Sheppard Mullin.

Says Abrahams: "Certainly it's not right for one family member to be working for a firm that's seeking approvals while the father is making a decision on the application."

The ethics complaint also alleges that Jeremy Chan:

... made financial donations of \$4,600 to City officials from Sept. 20, 2012 to July 17, 2013 (\$2,600 to Wendy Greuel on two occasions, \$1,300 to Eric Garcetti on June 6, and \$700 to Cindy Montanez on July 17), according to public records.

Abrahams asked the City Ethics Commission to investigate the sources of Chan's donations and whether his father "induced" them.

Raymond Chan was appointed interim general manager of Building and Safety by Villaraigosa in September of 2009 amidst a lurid controversy: his predecessor Andrew Adelman was forced out after an anonymous city consultant accused him of drugging, kidnapping and raping her.

In the four years since then, Chan has not been elevated to permanent general manager. The *Weekly* could not reach Chan -- Zamperini says city employees can't comment on allegations involving his son's internship with the firm that lobbies for Millennium as it's a complaint filed with the Ethics Commission.

Meanwhile, Blvd6200, which will contain more than 500 luxury residential units and extensive retail, already shoots up from the ground between Carlos Avenue and Hollywood Boulevard near Argyle Avenue.

It's "very likely" that the complex will be placed within a state regulated Alquist-Priolo Fault Zone when the state completes its trench-digging and mapping of the Hollywood Fault, says Parrish, and this will set off a mandatory geological investigation of the project.

While some Hollywood residents are not worried about what might be below their homes, others do worry about a fault capable of producing a 7-magnitude "surface rupture" in which the ground doesn't merely violently shake, but actually opens up.

John Walsh, a legendary community activist and City Hall watchdog, has been living in a two-story building across from Capitol Records -- and, it turns out, adjacent to the fault -- since 1976.

Walsh, who opposes the Millennium project, is often seen at City Council meetings and heard during public comment periods.

He says he isn't worried about his personal safety, but is worried about chaos in the streets after an earthquake, should the 39-and-35-story Millennium towers be built.

But, he also says, "For those who don't know [where the fault is], I have little sympathy for them."