

# **S.F. buildings getting slapped with quake-safety warnings**

**John Coté, San Francisco Chronicle, 10-08-14**

“Earthquake warning!” read the placard that San Francisco’s chief building inspector affixed Tuesday to the wall of a three-story Mediterranean-style building on a quiet street in the Marina district.

It was the first of 381 buildings — many in the older, northeast quadrant of the city — that are prone to collapse in a major earthquake and are being tagged for failing so far to comply with retrofit requirements adopted last year. It’s a very public enforcement approach to one of California’s most far-reaching requirements on upgrading privately owned buildings so they may withstand an earthquake.

San Francisco officials insist their tactic is not a public shaming — perhaps they’d prefer the term “consumer pressure.”

“If you’re a tenant in a building such as this, this probably would be meaningful to see,” said Patrick O’Riordan, the city’s chief building inspector, after taping up the warning placard, which explained that the building didn’t comply with San Francisco’s earthquake safety requirements, and a separate notice of violation. “I think they will be contacting their landlords regarding their concerns,” he said.

Twenty-five years after the Loma Prieta earthquake rocked the Bay Area and sent buildings crashing to the ground, particularly in the Marina district, the vast majority of owners of what are known as soft-story buildings have started complying with the city’s mandatory seismic retrofit law, signed by Mayor Ed Lee in April 2013.

About 94 percent of the roughly 6,600 property owners who were sent notices a year ago that their building may be covered by San Francisco’s law have complied with the first requirement by having an engineer or architect inspect the building and submit a screening form to the Department of Building Inspection to determine if a retrofit is needed.

## **Covered structures**

The regulations cover only wood-frame, soft-story buildings — those with large openings on the ground floor, like garage doors or picture windows — built before 1978. They must be at least three stories and contain five or more dwelling units. The requirements do not apply to single-family homes. Buildings retrofitted within the last 15 years are also exempt.

City officials estimate that more than 4,500 of the buildings in the pool will have to do some kind of retrofit, with the work typically ranging from \$60,000 to \$130,000. The cost, in many cases, can be passed on to tenants. The work must be done over the next three to six years,

depending on the type of occupants. Buildings with preschools, residential care facilities or similar uses would have to be retrofitted most quickly.

The soft-story buildings covered by the retrofit requirements contain an estimated 58,000 residents and businesses employing 7,000 workers, according to city estimates.

Owners of the 381 buildings have yet to submit their screening forms, despite multiple notices, and sometimes phone calls, from the Department of Building Inspection.

“We’re hoping by starting this code enforcement program with these postings, then others will submit these forms,” said William Strawn, a department spokesman.

### **Grace period**

The deadline to submit the screening form was Sept. 15, but property owners will not be fined if they submit the forms within 30 days of the posting of the earthquake warning tag on their building, city officials said.

Cost, ownership structure, ignorance or laziness could all play a role in why some building owners haven’t started the process.

At 1955-1963 Beach St., the first building to be tagged with a notice of noncompliance, one resident said the property was composed of condos. He darted inside as city building inspectors approached and wouldn’t answer his door later.

Property records show different owners for each of the units, one with an address in Connecticut and another in San Diego County.

Buildings that have out-of-town owners, or multiple owners in condominiums or tenancies in common, could contribute to a slow response in complying, officials said.

“People have forgotten about what happened in the (Loma Prieta) earthquake,” said building inspection Director Tom Hui, who started as a city employee the day before that quake.