

Editorial: L.A. has a lot of catching up to do in making buildings earthquake-safe

THE TIMES EDITORIAL BOARD, LOS ANGELES TIMES, 9-28-14

L.A. lags far behind San Francisco in pressuring building owners to make earthquake safety upgrades

Earthquakes don't kill people. Buildings kill people. That is an oft-repeated truism in earthquake science, but one that is commonly ignored by policymakers. It's easy to urge citizens to stock up on water in case the Big One hits. It's far more daunting to force property owners to take on the expense of retrofitting potentially dangerous buildings that could collapse in a catastrophic quake.

San Francisco has led the way in mandatory retrofitting of so-called soft-story wood-frame buildings that are vulnerable to collapse because they are built over carports or open areas and are supported by slender columns. The city passed a landmark ordinance last year requiring such buildings to be evaluated and retrofitted. In the first phase of the plan, the owners of more than 6,000 buildings were asked a year ago to have an architect or engineer fill out a basic screening form about the property. The deadline was Sept. 15 and 90% of owners complied. City officials then announced they would slap large signs on buildings — a seismic scarlet letter — belonging to owners who missed the deadline, saying “EARTHQUAKE WARNING!” and that the owner has not met the requirements of the law.

That kind of tough-mindedness is admirable, and we're glad Mayor Eric Garcetti is thinking about a similar letter-grade system in L.A. to inform residents about the safety of their buildings. That's pretty aggressive for a city that just a year ago had no inventory of vulnerable buildings, no plans to create one, and was approving new construction that could be perilously close to fault lines, based on outdated geological maps.

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Today, city officials have had their earthquake consciousness raised. The building department has been directed to inventory the thousands of multi-story apartment buildings to see which are wood-framed.

Garcetti has conferred with San Francisco officials on their plans and has tapped Lucy Jones, a U.S. Geological Survey seismologist, to develop an earthquake safety strategy for the city. The mayor has said he supports mandatory retrofitting, although he hasn't specified what type.

All that is promising. But L.A. is still behind San Francisco, Santa Monica and Berkeley. It hasn't even started to inventory concrete buildings to ascertain which lack enough steel reinforcement to keep them from collapsing. After some reluctance, a group of UC scientists did provide the city with a list of 1,500 concrete buildings built before 1976. But that list is really just a starting point for a more detailed inventory.

After the city has reliable lists, it should give owners a deadline to do detailed analyses of their buildings.

These steps are only precursors to the even more controversial move to force mandatory retrofitting. But they're necessary. If we know these buildings pose severe threats to people's lives in an earthquake, we should make it a priority to fix them.