

Proposition 13 -- Vote yes for quake safety

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On June 8, California voters will be asked to correct an element of property tax law in the state Constitution, a rule that poses risk to everyone in our earthquake-prone state.

Though Proposition 13 has no connection to the original and sometimes controversial property tax initiative of the same name passed in 1978, it does address the manner in which property taxes are assessed. And this time, structural safety -- not revenue -- is at the heart of the matter.

The problem: Owners of reinforced masonry structures get a limitless exclusion from reassessment after improvements are made, per the California Constitution. But those who beef up unreinforced masonry buildings receive just a 15-year break from reassessment. This is unfair, and it's dangerous.

It stands to reason that the latter group has less financial incentive to upgrade -- at the expense of earthquake safety, an unfortunate economic reality.

The solution: Change the Constitution to extend the exemption from reassessment to any and all retrofitted structures, regardless of construction type, value and region, until the property changes hands.

This will ensure that no property owner has a tax disincentive keeping him from doing what is right and prudent.

Unlike many other voter initiatives, there is no nebulous special interest group behind Proposition 13. We have state Sen. Roy Ashburn, R-Bakersfield, to thank for seeing the benefits of changing the rules and putting a proposal before the Legislature, which unanimously approved its language and placed it on the ballot.

And also unlike most other voter initiatives, this one has no organized opposition.

According to the Secretary of State's office, not a single argument against the proposition was submitted. Thus, none will appear on voter guides.

Another plus is that there will be little, if any, fiscal impact on local property tax revenue. This is because seismic retrofitting does not typically trigger reassessment as do new construction or renovation. Rather, retrofitting projects are viewed as repair and maintenance.

Proposition 13 will also ease the burden on county assessors' offices and the State Board of Equalization, which will no longer have to determine which projects qualify.

Earthquake retrofitting improvement should be a no-brainer, but vulnerable buildings still exist in many corners of the state. Kern County, for example, learned hard lessons from the immensely destructive 1952 quake, a magnitude 7.5 shaker that killed 12 people, caused some \$50 million in damage and resulted in the loss of many buildings in Bakersfield, Arvin and Tehachapi.

There are a number of unreinforced masonry buildings in Bakersfield that have been retrofitted, but a few non-retrofitted structures -- most of them unoccupied -- remain in town, according to Chris Lee, assistant buildings director for the city.

With a recent increase in seismic activity on the West Coast, it's virtually certain that our area will be struck again, as scientists expect a "big one" at any time. Regions along major fault lines, such as the San Francisco Bay and Los Angeles areas, are staring down the barrel of a loaded gun.

In this election, we see only an upside to passing Proposition 13.