

# Soft-story retrofits to become mandatory

**Mike Aldax, San Francisco Examiner, 1-17-10**

A renewed effort to urge property owners to seismically retrofit thousands of buildings in The City will now move from “voluntary to mandatory,” according to Mayor Gavin Newsom, as buildings failed to get upgraded.

About one-third of San Franciscans live in soft-story buildings, which are wood-framed and have a store, restaurant or parking garage on the first floor that are structurally weaker than the upper stories.

Mayor Gavin Newsom introduced legislation in recent years that would mandate the retrofits — which can cost between \$79,000 and \$132,000 per structure — but it was killed by the Board of Supervisors.

However, more recent legislation designed to encourage voluntary retrofits with small tax incentives has been called ineffective by analysts since the incentives offered would pay for only a small percentage of the costs.

Newsom said he “always intended” to make the improvements mandatory due to the probability of a major earthquake, but wanted to give owners time to capitalize on incentives before the retrofits became required.

“Clearly they’re not taking advantage of the voluntary, so that will allow us to now move forward [with mandatory],” he said, adding that the Board of Supervisors would now support the measure.

Board President David Chiu said he would support the idea. The “tragic catastrophe in Haiti” and the ineffectiveness of the voluntary plan signal a need for a more drastic approach, he said.

To make certain they are retrofitted, Newsom said his new approach will be multipronged: setting up incentives, requirements and deadlines and establishing financing options for property owners.

The Newsom administration is mulling ways to provide low-interest loans to building owners to pay for the upgrades. Among the strategies include a general obligation bond or the reconstitution of unused bond money from the Loma Prieta earthquake.

Those strategies would have to go before voters on the June ballot.

“We were hoping to get it in by [the] June [ballot],” Newsom said.

Representatives of property owners aren’t happy about the suggestion of mandatory retrofits, saying it would financially cripple some owners who are already struggling with draconian rent restrictions.

“We are bombarded with unfunded mandates and it’s not easy to recoup our costs,” said Noni Richen, board president of the Small Property Owners of San Francisco Institute.

Janan New, executive director of the San Francisco Apartment Association, said The City needs to set guidelines before mandating retrofits.

New said her association would not support mandatory retrofits if The City requires expensive “gold-plate standards,” but may approve if the standards include “simple, cost-effective life-safety methods.”

## **Prone to failure**

A study surveying the impact of a 7.2-magnitude earthquake to 2,800 particularly vulnerable multistory buildings found that:

- 300 to 850 could collapse
- 1,200 to 2,400 would be severely damaged and could not be occupied
- 58,000 residents estimated to live inside them would be displaced
- 2,000 businesses employing 7,000 people would be affected
- \$1.5 billion in damage could be expected, with cost for retrofitting buildings to withstand quake estimated at \$260 million